“SACRIFICES AND SUFFERINGS OF TRUE AMERICANS”:
BLACK WOMEN'S NATIONALISM AND ACTIVISM IN PHILADELPHIA, 1863-1901

A Dissertation in
History and Women’s, Gender, and Sexuality Studies

by

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ABSTRACT

This dissertation presents and analyzes the contributions of African American women in Philadelphia during and after the Civil War. Women there wrestled with the gaps between their theoretical legal rights and their lived realities, helping to shape black female intellectual and protest traditions that remain evident to this day. Black women's political power was not as limited as it may seem due to their lack of suffrage; while their electoral power at the national and state level was severely hindered, their influence at the scale of their churches, their neighborhoods, and in the context of their local benevolent work was quite potent. It was in their work at this "small" scale that black women articulated their visions of national citizenship and their claims to American freedom and prosperity. From the 1860s through the early twentieth century, African American women grew a localized ethic of care into national institutions that cared for black people and promoted their equal access to opportunity.

During the Civil War, black women joined black men in debating the possible outcomes of black enlistment in the Union Army, ultimately deciding that violence and the risk of death were worth the potential gains in civil and social rights that victory could bring. In the decade after the war, formerly enslaved southern African Americans moved North; women and girls faced poverty and incarceration while faced with severely limited economic opportunities and even fewer public resources. For these women, physical survival was the first "freedom struggle." Wealthier women whose families could provide access to education became a vital part of private and religious benevolent work that supported the poor. They also made it their work to present their community in the best light possible, combating racism during Philadelphia's preparations for the 1876 Centennial World's Fair. Embracing the highest ideals of their nation, black women advocated for their full inclusion in American life, including the imperialist project of spreading American-style democracy and capitalism throughout the globe at the turn of the twentieth century. Archival sources include local and regional newspapers from the period, letters, diaries, family paper collections, maps, photographs, and state and federal census and institutional data.
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INTRODUCTION

This dissertation examines African American women's public lives in Philadelphia from the Civil War to the Gilded Age. It considers the nature of their commitments to the nation-state and their strategies for improving the lives of black people. Philadelphia had not only the largest African American population outside of the South at this time, but its religious and social leaders had an outsized influence on the intellectual and political lives of African Americans nationally. Beginning in the 1860s with northern black women's mobilization for war, this study traces black women's experiences through the clubwomen's movement of the 1890s, linking the family and intellectual traditions that grew from abolitionism and resulted in twentieth-century national political action. Never entirely independent of black men, nor wholly separate from the black church, black women were committed to American ideals, compassionate toward the weak, and dedicated to changing the world.

Although the struggle against racism was central for many women, their specific strategies for change were deeply contingent on personal experience. Commitments to home, to neighbors, and to spiritual community localized black women's understanding of their duties and rights as American citizens. Black women's intellectual lives extended well beyond their freedom struggle, into political philosophy, modernity, and the future of the American experiment in democracy. I consider the experiences of African American women—impoverished or relatively wealthy, educated or illiterate, formerly enslaved or free for generations—through the lens of nationalism in order to clarify black women's sense of collective purpose in a world of new opportunities and hardships spurred by
emancipation. Black people were united across America—and across town—by their nationality.

Philadelphia has been the setting for several scholarly works of nineteenth-century African American history, with a recent surge in antebellum era studies. Biographies of leading black men have described the abolitionist work of Robert Purvis and James Forten and their cooperation with white Quakers. A popular biography of Octavius Catto links the much larger antebellum historiography to war time and Reconstruction-era African American organizing, though it is one of only a handful of works that consider black Philadelphia after the 1860s.¹ Although historical research into the lives of African American women in the South during the Civil War and Reconstruction has blossomed since the early 1990s, a much smaller body of work examines black women in the North. Sectional differences among women according to class, religion, education, and labor status

were often significant in this period, but studies centered on black women have tended to focus on the South.\(^2\)

This study contextualizes the intellectual and political contributions of African American women in Philadelphia, a northern metropolitan center with significant southern cultural influence. Women there wrestled with the gaps between legal rights and lived realities after the Civil War, shaping black female intellectual and protest traditions that remain evident to this day. Black women’s political power was not as limited as it may seem due to their lack of suffrage; while their electoral power at the national and state level was severely hindered, their influence at the scale of their churches, their neighborhoods, and in the context of their local benevolent work was quite potent. It was in their work at this “small” scale that black women articulated their visions of national citizenship and their claims to American freedom and prosperity.\(^3\)


\(^3\) There is a broad geographical literature on "scale," from the global and international to the local and even the individual body. Feminist geographers have focused on the political content of “the embodied, everyday, informal practices that make manifest the ‘place’ of traditionally disempowered people ... within all manner of ostensibly geopolitical landscapes.” This approach helps “to unsettle the implied fixity of social categories — the marginalised, the vulnerable.” Deborah P. Dixon and Sallie A. Marston, “Introduction: Feminist Engagements with Geopolitics,” *Gender, Place & Culture* 18, No. 4 (August 2011): 445-446. Feminist geopolitics and its implications for inclusion of marginalized voices and epistemologies are discussed at length in Lorraine Dowler and Joanne Sharpe, “A Feminist Geopolitics?” *Space & Polity* 5, No. 3 (2001): 165-176, and Jennifer Hyndman, “Mind the Gap: Bridging Feminist and Political Geography Through Geopolitics,” *Political Geography* 23, No. 3 (2004): 307–322. On scale generally, see Andrew Herod, *Scale* (New York: Routledge, 2011). bell hooks has asserted that local “spaces of marginality” are not just “a site of deprivation [but] also a site of radical possibility, a space of resistance.” hooks, *Yearning: Race, Gender, and Cultural Politics* (Boston: South End Press, 1990), 342.
Close attention to black women’s own expressions about their sense of belonging in the nation helps to overcome a common problem of studies in African American history and women’s history: the invisibility of black women. Generalizations about black people in the late-nineteenth century often ignore gender, collapsing vital distinctions between black men and black women. Similarly, considerations of early feminism in the United States have tended to describe white women’s ideologies, at times ignoring black women entirely, or presuming their basic similarity to white women without rigorously considering their standpoint as people of color. In the process, African American women have often been lost in the margins of historical writing. Historians of black women and black feminist scholars have called for more precise studies that fully engage the unique experiences of black women and their own history of thought—a need this study helps to address.4

As in the twentieth-century freedom struggle, electoral activism and claims on the state were undertaken by a relatively small portion of the African American population in the Civil War era; Philadelphia boasted the largest black population outside the South in 1870, but most of the activist leagues and benevolent associations born there were launched by members of a few interconnected families. The vast majority of the city’s black citizens likely supported the political goals of the Pennsylvania Equal Rights League, which

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advocated black male suffrage, eligibility for jury service, and efforts to desegregate the streetcars, but many could not attend meetings that took away from work opportunities and childcare duties. Historian Steven Hahn suggests that in such circumstances—such as slavery—scholars should seek evidence of political movement in unconventional spaces, where African Americans “constituted themselves as political actors in a society that tried to refuse them that part.” Labor negotiations, family ties, and “circuits of communication and education (especially rumor)” should be understood as modes of African American “politics” prior to formal suffrage and large-scale party participation, Hahn argues. In her study of post-bellum plantation households, Thavolia Glymph uncovered similar modes of political speech among black women who asserted their full citizenship in similarly unconventional ways. By choosing clothing that was aesthetically ornate, for instance, black women occupied previously inaccessible space in public life; inappropriate for the kind of domestic work African American women were “supposed” to do, such dress made a public statement of class consciousness and pride that rankled white supremacists. Glenda Gilmore’s examination of early twentieth-century North Carolina women’s organizations asserts that black women’s “civic strategies” involved a “delicate balance of gender relations, ever-adaptive interracial tactics shaped by place and circumstance, and an array of weapons sheathed in quivers bound by class position.” Historian of black religious women Bettye Collier-Thomas affirms this attention to underrepresented historical actors, arguing that scholars have typically “overlooked the very rich and complex history of organizational networks and the ways in which women functioned in, among, and across black and white, male and female, religious and secular organizations.” Black women did
not let their lack of formal access to electoral politics limit their participation in the political process.⁵

When Hahn asserts that enslaved people's kinship ties are political alliances, or that gossip with one another is political speech, he stretches the bounds of the “political” to encompass a population generally ignored by those with formal acceptance in the nineteenth-century body politic—namely white males. Hahn seeks to make visible those women and men whose very humanity (not just their political thought) went disregarded by many white Americans. An unspoken assumption, however, is that the measure of events’ or actors’ importance in history is the degree to which they were “political.” Forgotten African Americans’ actions and perspectives have thus been made significant by their interpretation as “political,” and not mundane in nature. A logical extension of this framing is that African Americans were “always already” activists, always resisting slavery and racism. Such thinking can wander easily into what historian Kidada Williams has called “healing narratives,” or framings of history that help present day Americans feel better about an upsetting past. Healing narratives circumvent the far less inspirational possibility that many poor black people suffered and struggled under white supremacy, not for political power, nor for the sake of the greater good, but for no good reason at all. Gossip can be recognized as a vital community-building device and a way to make hours of labor feel more meaningful without also being a black parallel to white partisan debate. The

search for the “political” in unconventional spaces can “give agency” that is not in fact what every historical actor sought—and is perhaps not “ours” to give. It is inspiring to discover political self-empowerment among previously overlooked people in unconventional sources, but this framing can lead to generalizations with significant blind spots.6

Hahn’s reading of individual labor struggles and communication as political acts locates historical agency within oppressed groups, but it also introduces ambiguity to the already difficult process of interpreting poor black people’s lives in the nineteenth century. Glymph’s reading of women’s acts similarly clouds the interpretive process: surely women chose their clothing according to functional use and personal aesthetics in addition to political expression. It is challenging then, without explicit sources, to determine when such behaviors were political, and when they were simply practical. How can we recover past individuals’ own views of their motivations and actions when they were not recorded at the time? Probably we cannot. The key, then, is to seek and find the frame that black women themselves used to describe their engagement in politics. A desire to fully enjoy the freedoms promised in the Declaration of Independence—life, liberty, and the pursuit of

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6 Hahn and Gilmore stretch the definition of politics to include acts and actors that have been excluded from historical studies in past generations. I am suggesting that these scholars take for granted that the “political” is the standard against which human acts should be measured to rate their historical significance; they must then shoehorn past actors lives into an arbitrary category of analysis defined initially by white men. If the frame of reference for African American women’s history requires comparison to orthodox “political history,” we are bound to read black women’s actions before they gained suffrage as proto-political, and those after as somehow more legitimate. This framing unintentionally reiterates the long-discredited “consensus,” progressive history, in which African Americans’ story is a gradual transition from savagery to civilization. What has changed in recent tellings of this story is that African Americans are themselves the agents of that change; the progression from savagery, however, remains the central framing device. On this tradition in American history, see Gail Bederman, Manliness and Civilization: A Cultural History of Gender and Race in the United States, 1880-1917 (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1996). On consensus, see Peter Novick, That Noble Dream: The “Objectivity Question” and the American Historical Profession (Cambridge [England]: Cambridge University Press, 1988), esp. Chapter 3. Kidada E. Williams, @KidadaEWilliams, https://twitter.com/KidadaEWilliams/status/565143093855657986 (accessed March 5, 2015). On agency in scholarly interpretation, see Walter Johnson, “On Agency,” Journal of Social History 37, No. 1 (2003): 113-124.
happiness—led Emilie Davis to commit her time and skills to serving the Union Army’s wounded black soldiers, Mary Ash to seek opportunity in the post-war North, Caroline LeCount to demand public recognition of her patriotism, and Frances Watkins Harper to advocate American-inspired freedom throughout the world. Black women’s dedication to their nation’s highest potential defined their politics and their priorities.

When Emilie Davis learned that the young men from her school and her church had been rejected for service with Pennsylvania’s Union forces because of their dark skin she felt both “glad and sorry.” She abhorred slavery but she loved life, and she knew the toll war would demand, however high its aims. Though she lived in the free city of Philadelphia, her life chances were inextricably linked to her color; before the war, slave catchers from the South might have kidnapped her as easily as an actual runaway. Her occupation, her education, and her opportunities remained constrained by law and custom in a white supremacist culture and legal structure. A few months later President Lincoln broke down the remaining barriers to black enlistment, and Philadelphia’s black community prepared for war. Davis and the women around her set their minds and labors on behalf of the millions still enslaved, even as the government they supported offered little support in return.7

The prominent and prolific Philadelphia poet, author, and orator Frances Ellen Watkins Harper spent the years of the 1860s and 70s denouncing slavery, promoting Union victory, advocating women’s education and encouraging black communities throughout the country. By 1901, Harper’s energies had grown to encompass a much broader scale of

progress, as she let loose “A wail of sorrow on the air / And sob of bitter woe” over the
death of America’s imperialist president William McKinley. While McKinley’s motivations
were economic, Harper’s apparent grief matched the intensity of her belief in an empire of
Christian democracy that would bring light to the world’s dark places. Harper believed
black women had a special role to play, because of what they had successfully endured, in
influencing the future of the civilized world. Though she never lost sight of the women and
girls working to educate themselves in the decades after the Civil War, Harper advocated a
global American paternalism descended from the logic of Manifest Destiny.8

Davis and Harper’s illustrations of black women’s national belonging demonstrate a
way in which many black women considered themselves a “community,” obligated to help
one another and all oppressed peoples with access to education, economic opportunity,
physical safety, and most importantly, freedom from bondage. Davis claimed American
rights and responsibilities even before they were fully recognized by the United States
government; Harper extended those responsibilities to include serving all of humanity.
Black women’s common commitment to freedom is the thread that links their antebellum
abolitionism and their twentieth century activism.

The following chapters examine the ways that black Philadelphia women sought
freedom and built community from the period of the Civil War through the 1890s. Chapter
1 provides context for the claim that women’s social and intellectual lives extended far
beyond “struggle” and “resistance.” Scholarly focus on federal Constitutional amendments
celebrates important progress toward social equality, but conceals the local experience that

8 Frances Harper, “In Memoriam. Wm. McKinley,” American Negro Historical Society Collection,
Historical Society of Pennsylvania.
was in fact the true measure of change. Rooted in Philadelphia’s strong and independent black churches, women dedicated their time and attention to the empowerment of the next generation through education. Families pieced together household incomes with a wide variety of occupations from dressmaking to domestic work to medical practice. Even civil war did not entirely upend daily routines, though Union progress provided the backdrop for African American women to articulate a proud and hopeful American national identity. Shaped by national victory over slavery and persistent local manifestations of racism, black women exhibited a “neighborhood nationalism” that was simultaneously hopeful and practical. When black men around her cheered their own progress toward national suffrage in 1866, Harriet Forten Purvis called their applause “useless” until black women could make it to school, to church, or to work without being kicked out of a white-only Philadelphia streetcar. Prioritizing educational opportunity, family stability, and economic independence, African American women measured successes and setbacks not only on the national scale, but in their homes, on their sidewalks, and in their classrooms.

In Chapter 2, the unique circumstances of war brought both fear and radical hope to the lives of northern black women. In 1863, northern black families were suddenly faced with responding to Lincoln’s much-delayed call for black enlistees in the Union Army. The deep pride felt by black male soldiers and sailors is well known; the links between manhood, national identity, and military service seemed clear and immediate. As one member of the U.S. Colored Troops from North Carolina made plain, “I felt like a man with a uniform and a gun in my hand.” But women’s attitudes are far more difficult to find in existing scholarship. Accounts of black enlistment in the Civil War have tended to treat black women as mere symbols of sentiment—mothers and wives, but not Americans with
independent ideas or identities. In fact, women had a pivotal role to play in mobilization, as an all-male army could only exist with the reproductive labor of females alongside them in camp and at home. Black women’s war work was both material, as in the maintenance of soldiers’ needs and delivery of nursing care, and ideological, in the emotional and rhetorical nourishment of men in arms. As members of what Judith Giesberg has termed an “army at home,” women faced a unique set of anxieties not limited to fear for their loved ones’ safety. How would black women support themselves and their children with half the pay of white military families? What shape would their own “mobilization” take in a local economy that still rejected their skills in all but domestic work? Changing social norms of femininity and class shaped women’s response to these challenges, and their confidence in themselves as patriotic Americans was enhanced no less than their male contemporaries.9

The contributions of more than 180,000 African American enlisted men to Union victory made the social gains of Reconstruction possible. But those gains were hard to see for many, as poverty continued to limit the opportunities of countless black Americans after the war. Chapter 3 sees the freedom struggle shift from battlefields to classrooms, poor houses and even prisons, where Philadelphia’s black urban underclass sometimes ended up amidst the economic strains of peace time. Black churches and benevolent associations focused their support on those poorer Philadelphians—many of them recent migrants from the South—out of earnest religious conviction, but also because they knew that white Americans would measure the abilities of all black people by the lowest and least educated among them. Destitute black women and girls demonstrated their own

resistance to oppression, however, with the tools available to them. When girls as young as seven withheld their labor and cooperation, or even tried to burn down the homes of their white employers, they asserted their own power in the only ways they knew. Their struggle for “rights” operated at the most basic level: the right to survive. Recognition of poor women’s unique experience requires an expanded vocabulary for “struggle” long after the formal abolition of slavery, making space in the narrative of the long civil rights movement for those who could not participate in even the limited formal political venues available to black activists. The “uplift” that black benevolent women imagined would expand their political and social power in the United States depended on the progress of women, men, and children who were wracked with poverty. An examination of court records, prison intake logs, and crime reports in local papers helps to piece together the lives of those women and girls whose progress would shape the reputation, and perhaps the future, of the “race.”

Those women who were able to attain professional skills with the help of their community and their own dedication earned recognition of their heightened status by both black and white Philadelphians. In the early 1870s, elite white women’s preparations for the city’s celebration of the nation’s hundredth anniversary included an effort to involve black women—though the invited women found the terms of inclusion demeaning and unconscionable. The resulting struggle among black Philadelphia women over how (or if) to participate in the Centennial World’s Fair struck at the heart of post-war national identity and probed the bounds of the nation African Americans imagined for themselves after defeating slavery. Chapter 4 compares the thinking of women like Dr. Rebecca Cole and Caroline LeCount who worked to define the terms of their connections to mainstream
white society, to the federal state, and to the imagined community of the United States of America. Foretelling the intellectual divide between W. E. B. Du Bois’s separatism and Booker T. Washington’s “accommodationism” a generation later, Philadelphia women engaged in the vital and often overlooked work of sorting out just who belonged in the “reconstructed” North, how, and at what cost. Resisting white women’s ideas about black women’s proper “place,” Cole and LeCount articulated the radical possibilities of black equality even as northern whites reasserted their supremacy with Gilded Age calls to return to the antebellum status quo.

Chapter 5 follows this intellectual work into the 1880s and 90s, when white reconciliation replaced the post-Civil War project of emancipation and justice with a reinvigorated national effort at westward expansion into Indian territory. Black women entered debates over the morality of empire and solidarity with the world’s other oppressed peoples. Nationally known Philadelphia orator Frances Watkins Harper advocated the expansion of American ideals throughout the globe. Harper believed the power of education and equality could remake the earth under the ideals of anti-racist American patriots. Northerner Amanda Berry Smith, Protestant missionary and advocate of black respectability, used her position as a widely-read religious voice to argue in favor of racial uplift and nativism. In what might be read as a female corollary to Booker T. Washington’s *Up from Slavery*, Smith’s *Autobiography* presented the world in the 1880s as a place in which the (other) dark peoples of the earth were overrunning respectable residents of the United States like herself. The American project had offered civilization and salvation to thousands under Smith’s influence in Africa, and it could do ever more. Engaging in what feminist scholars have more recently termed the “politics of solidarity,”
Harper, Smith, and others drew explicit comparisons between the experiences of non-white Americans and recently arrived migrants. African Americans observed carefully the policies of the federal government toward other racial outsiders in order to negotiate their own relationship to the American state.

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In her diary on January 1, 1863, the day Lincoln’s Emancipation Proclamation went into effect, Emilie Davis marked that “To day has bin a memorable day and i thank god i have bin sperd to see it.” There was no question in Emilie’s mind that the day memorable to historians as a watershed in African American history was a momentous one in her own life. But Davis did not stop there. “We had quite a jubilee in the evenin,” she continued, and “i went to Joness to a Party [and] had a very pleasant time.” It was not only the fact of the beginning of national emancipation that needed remembering, but the joy and celebration that accompanied it. Simply “having” emancipation in an abstract political sense was not enough; the joy had to be experienced in community—at a party—to reflect its whole meaning. In the same way, the everyday efforts at survival by the poorest child and the most lauded scholar are as much a part of the African American story as are the moments of national political victory. The many highs and lows of the civil rights struggle punctuated, but did not define, who and what these women were.10

This deceptively simple observation has often gone overlooked in scholarly examinations of African Americans’ political struggle. The relative invisibility of black women’s daily effort to survive in the American historical canon is perhaps understandable.

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in a field that was dominated for more than a century by white male scholars. It may follow that white scholars’ understanding of black women’s experience focused on the parts of that experience most noticeable to white male onlookers: African Americans’ full humanity was made legible to most white Americans only when black activists earned increasing recognition under the law. Those moments of white recognition figure large in the mainstream narrative of African American history. But as black feminist thinker Patricia Hill Collins has argued, if “domination is organized and operates via intersecting oppressions, then resistance must show comparable complexity.” This study illustrates the complexity of African American women’s resistance to a racist and sexist culture through militarism, patriotism, imperialism, and even arson.11

In the introduction to his history titled *Black Reconstruction in America* (1935), W. E. B. Du Bois did not conceal his belief that “the Negro in America and in general is an average and ordinary human being, who under [a] given environment develops like other human beings,” and, given an equal opportunity, is capable of great things. Frances Coppin, principal at the Institute for Colored Youth in Philadelphia, did not record black women’s contributions to education and evangelism as a nostalgic curiosity; she intended for younger black Americans to remember them as “a means of inspiring those who will be told of their work and worth.” Northern African American women wanted much more than an end to prejudice and oppression. They were the beginning of a new world in which they not only survived, but thrived.12

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CHAPTER 1.

Home, Hearth, and Heart: Local Measures of Progress in Black Philadelphia

The Stevens-Cogdell-Sanders-Venning family papers include materials belonging to black Philadelphians from at least eight generations, stretching from the 1730s to the 1970s. Among letters, laundry bills, birth certificates, and newspaper clippings is a large album with paperboard covers, the property of Miss Cordelia Sanders. Cordelia’s “scrapbook” deserves a more dignified name given the obvious care and tenderness with which she filled its pages in the decade before the Civil War. The teenaged girl dedicated hours to locating the most vivid pictures, the most romantic poems, and the most inspiring devotionals to paste carefully in the book’s leaves. She did not know it at the time, but her girlish fantasies of passionate love, the perfect ball gown, and picnics by the seaside were an exercise in dreaming and idealism that would serve her well in the decades ahead.

The contents of this young black woman’s scrapbook—hardly political by any conventional definition of the term—require a reconsideration of what women like Cordelia Sanders were doing and thinking while they were struggling against racism and sexism. What did the world that they created for themselves and their families out of the ingenuity and the joy of their hearts look like? How did they sustain that rich world—one that contained a dedication to “rights” and “resistance,” to be sure, but also much more? Dozens of dried leaves, likely gathered around Cordelia’s home at 1116 Fitzwater Street, speak to whimsy and simple delight in a historical actor who, due to her color and sex, has typically been presented as a somber victim of oppression. Activists knew a fuller life than

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mere politics; in fact, their politics were born of their joy and boundless hope for a “brighter coming day” on the streets of their own neighborhoods. To better understand the context in which African American women resisted injustice in the era of the Civil War and Reconstruction, we need to look not only at their rejection of oppression, but at the acceptance and equal opportunity they imagined should take its place.14

Scholars and average citizens alike often assume we understand what historical civil rights activists were struggling to attain. Undergraduate students of mine, for instance, often lump Martin Luther King, Jr.’s anti-racist activism with contemporary struggles for same-sex marriage as equally important justice issues that all “progressives” must have cared about—a juxtaposition the Baptist minister would have considered unthinkable in the 1960s. In my students’ context, however, racism and heterosexism are mainstream social issues. In their own time, black women in 1860s Philadelphia advocated wholeheartedly for black male suffrage, generally setting aside calls for female suffrage, until after passage of the Fifteenth Amendment. Just as King focused his attention on the goals in which his parishioners were most deeply invested, Philadelphia’s black women focused on the most pressing justice issues within their own social context: first abolition, then equal educational opportunity and the freedom to walk through life unmolested. Black male suffrage could make all of those achievable more quickly. Their differences with white woman suffrage advocates are important to understanding African American women’s development of a black feminist tradition reflecting their own life experiences. Rather than assuming what “justice” looked like to Cordelia Sanders, her friends, and fellow

churchgoers in the 1860s and 70s, we can consider the ways they spent their time, the causes they chose to support, and the issues they advocated most vociferously. Though foremost in the minds of white women activists, woman suffrage was not among those primary issues for black women. Neither were women's initiation of divorce, or her right to earn and keep wages in her own name. While individual black women certainly had opinions on these issues, they chose to define their struggle for justice in terms that matched the priorities of the black community at large.

The slave states’ rebellion began when Cordelia Sanders was twenty years old, and she set aside her album to serve wounded soldiers of the U.S. Colored Troops in hospitals around the city, believing the men's selflessness deserved care in return. Throughout her brief adulthood—she died at 38—Cordelia replaced her childhood longing for golden curls with a commitment to the poverty-stricken emancipated people arriving in Philadelphia seeking relief, and a future, in a large and thriving black community. Cordelia was not the only person who took up an increased public role when the opportunity arose. She was part of a broad network of Philadelphia women who put their skills and social networks to work for their country, their community, and their cause. Activism grew from the relationships of churchwomen, fellow students, neighbors, and women sharing seats in the “colored” section of segregated streetcars.\(^{15}\)

Consideration of black women’s interior and interpersonal lives is not an exercise in curiosity or only a desire for “thicker” history. In addition to assuming we know what our

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\(^{15}\) Genealogical chart, Box 6, Folder 55, SCSV Collection, Library Company of Philadelphia. The foundational analysis of women’s communal activism in this era is Lori D. Ginzberg, *Women and the Work of Benevolence: Morality, Politics, and Class in the Nineteenth-Century United States* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1990). Ginzberg notes that “the historical focus on suffrage” as the chief object and measure of women’s activism “has distorted the history of women’s participation in the political process” (68 n2).
subjects struggled for, an unintended consequence of revisionist historians’ interest in black Americans’ freedom struggle is a tendency to reduce their complex humanity. In fact, when scholars highlight only the racism and sexism that black women resisted, and not women’s own production of knowledge and culture, their story can read as essentially reactive—a narrative forever caught in the shadow of their oppressors’ heinous actions. What tales remain can be redemptive and inspirational, but they can also be quite thin on why black women resisted, or just what they sought to protect by their resistance. We might assume some of the same desires that have motivated human action throughout history—power, love, family, survival—but assumption is unnecessary, as we do not lack for evidence in this case. There must be space within the recognition of historic and ongoing wrongs to celebrate the multitudes contained in our subjects. We can begin to recover black women’s own knowledge by exploring the world they made.\(^{16}\)

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Nearly every formal gathering of black women in Philadelphia had its origins in the social network of a local Christian church. Mother Bethel African Methodist Episcopal (AME) Church was perhaps the best known African American faith community in the nation at the time of the Civil War; it was nearly 70 years old when women from its congregation and others gathered in 1863 to serve the needs of wounded black soldiers, and their widows and orphans. Neighborhoods in the Fifth, Seventh, and Eighth Wards of Center City Philadelphia were home to several black churches—AME, Presbyterian, Patricia Hill Collins has commented on the importance not only of recovering black women’s history, but recovering historical women’s modes of thinking, as well. “Offering U.S. Black women new knowledge about our own experiences can be empowering. But activating epistemologies that criticize prevailing knowledge and that enable us to define our own realities on our own terms has far greater implications.” Patricia Hill Collins, *Black Feminist Thought: Knowledge, Consciousness, and the Politics of Empowerment*, 1990 (New York: Routledge, 2000), 273, emphasis in original.
Baptist—that served parishioners from around the city. The ethic of care that animated women across the class spectrum was rooted in their Christian commitment to be the Biblical “body of Christ” at work in the world, and from churches’ communal investment in the improvement of black lives. The Church’s weekly and yearly calendars ordered the lives of black Philadelphians, and the institutional Church cemented the links among education, care for the poor, justice activism, and personal morality that had defined black respectability in the North since the early national era. Indeed, the earliest petitions by African Americans in the 1790s were produced in concert with Bishop Richard Allen of Mother Bethel. Black women's most intensive work for women's voting rights in the nineteenth century was not in the electoral realm, but in the context of church membership and participation in pastor selection. The black church, both North and South, was a public sphere set aside, beyond the control of the white state and even, in many cases, the slave owners. In the decades after the Civil War, the church “functioned not only as the house of worship but as an agency of social control, forum of discussion and debate, promoter of education and economic cooperation, and arena for the development and assertion of leadership.” The black church was “the most powerful institution of racial self-help in the African American community”—a spiritual, social, personal, and political response to a white supremacist state. Black churches were “communities of struggle” for “the expression, celebration, and pursuit of a black collective will and identity.” Philadelphia churchwomen were not only the community’s social workers, employment agents, and truant officers, but also the defenders of the “race.”

Churches afforded African Americans "opportunities to reclaim and rearticulate their political subjectivity in a space ungoverned by whites." Such counter-cultural spaces offered "protective boundaries against white appropriation and supervision," as black Americans took their exclusion from white public life and turned it back in upon itself in an act of creative dissent. Building their own sites of public discourse, antebellum African Americans wrote their own rules for participation in public life. As early black political speech necessarily centered around the institution of slavery, discourses in the black public sphere often emphasized reclaiming the "property" of the black self. "If the message for individual blacks encoded in the bourgeois public sphere was, 'You are public property,'” argued literary scholar Joanna Brooks, “the message of the black counterpublic to whites was, 'Only we can own who we are.’” The "we” in Brooks’ formulation is vital; while the slave was seen by his or her owner as a single, discrete unit of productive labor on a balance sheet, the crux of the African American church, and perhaps black culture more generally, was the notion that black people were all in this together. “Only we can own who we are.”

It was in that spirit that Philadelphia’s black churchgoers thought of themselves as their brothers’ and sisters’ keepers; the local church was the epicenter, both geographically


and socially, of black benevolent work. In the pulpit and the pews, plans were made for new or expanded services for the poor, for widows and orphans, for the abused and neglected throughout the city. In the late 1880s, Philadelphia was second only to Washington, DC, in the percentage of its total population attending Sunday School in addition to worship services (18.5%), but the black church’s influence on daily life reached far beyond weekend church instruction. Nearly 90% of black Sunday School students attended classes at black churches with black teachers, representing the commitment of African Americans to building community on their own terms.19

Black churches were not, as a rule, opposed to inter-racial benevolent work. In the earlier antebellum period, such cooperation may have been a financial necessity: white Philadelphia Quakers were instrumental in founding and funding black private schools like the Institute for Colored Youth, as well as institutions like the Association for the Care of Colored Orphans. Even as the wealthier, “aspiring class” of black Philadelphians grew in the Civil War era, black women continued to partner with white religious and benevolent women in fairs and fundraisers for the benefit of the poor, or to raise funds for black educational development in the South. Philadelphia agents of the U.S. Sanitary Commission requested written contributions on the topic of “the Sanitary” in the pages of the AME Church’s Christian Recorder in time to print a record of the Great Central Sanitary Fair of 1864 “on the finest paper.” But the city’s history of white riots against abolitionism and black equality limited organizers’ interest in black contributions to the fair, which

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President Lincoln himself attended: speakers like William Still and Octavius Catto were excluded—though planners somehow found room in the proceedings for minstrel performers in black face.20

Social activism and resistance to injustice grew from the daily experiences of household duties and work, but typically found its expression under the auspices of the local congregation. When black churchwomen traveled through town to acquire household supplies, inquire about employment, visit friends, or attend services, they engaged with an urban cultural climate that usually tolerated but did not welcome their presence. Indeed, a major flashpoint for women activists in the Civil War era was unequal access to private streetcars for basic transportation. Black passengers rode at the discretion of white streetcar operators, who could relegate them to segregated seating or simply refuse to let them board. When a Mrs. Derry paid her fare and boarded a Philadelphia car late one evening in April 1865, she took her seat but was quickly told to disembark by Mr. Lowry, a white conductor. When Derry refused—she said she was tired after a late night at church serving wounded soldiers—Lowry enlisted some white male passersby to forcibly remove Derry from the car, violently striking and kicking her and tearing her clothes in the process. The Court of Common Pleas found Lowry’s behavior indefensible, despite his claim that he

20 The Institute for Colored Youth was originally founded in the 1830s on the outskirts of Philadelphia “with bequests from two Quakers: $10,000 from Richard Humphrey, and $18,000 from Jonathan Zane.” Its later incarnation at 915 Bainbridge Street in 1852 was under the auspices of the largely white Philadelphia Friends Committee, although the school’s principal (Fannie Jackson Coppin) and teaching staff were African American. “Institute for Colored Youth,” William Still: An African American Abolitionist, Temple University Library, http://stillfamily.library.temple.edu/people-and-places/institute-colored-youth (accessed March 19, 2017). “Aspiring class” is borrowed from Michele Mitchell, who rightly points out the problems of “middle class” and “working class” labels for nineteenth century African Americans, who often identified socially with bourgeois standards of living and etiquette, while continuing to work in occupations more closely identified with the white laboring class. See Mitchell, Righteous Propagation: African Americans and the Politics of Racial Destiny after Reconstruction (Chapel Hill: UNC Press, 2004), Kindle, locations 134-136. The Christian Recorder, April 30, 1864. Richard S. Newman, “All’s Fair: Philadelphia and the Sanitary Fair Movement during the Civil War,” Pennsylvania Legacies 13, No. 1-2 (June 2013): 62.
was only executing company policy. Derry was awarded $50 in damages, and the case helped to publicize the growing effort by black Philadelphians to gain equal treatment in public conveyances.\textsuperscript{21}

The following year, however, the editor of The Christian Recorder still had to decry the fact that “good men look at Philadelphia, and wonder why a community so influenced by Christianity, so intelligent and liberal in ideas, would tolerate the injustice to colored men, which is everyday made manifest” in the “streetcars, public places of amusement and instruction, and the passenger rooms at the depots. ... We can assign no reason for it, unless it be that there is a lack of courage; and bad, bad, negro-hating men are allowed to control matters in their own way.” Another six months of agitation and activism was required before the Pennsylvania legislature—over a filibuster by Democrats—voted to guarantee equal access to streetcars regardless of a rider’s skin color. This victory passed in the pages of the Recorder with surprisingly little fanfare. While waiting for the Senate to complete its own procedures, the bill’s passage already assured, the editor framed the vote as just one small step in a long journey: “in the mean time, let our colored citizens, in the future, as in the past, be heroic and hopeful, working, watching and praying for the grand result; for no power on earth can continue to keep down a people like our own, who are marching on in improvement, keeping step to the music of their own throbbing hearts.”\textsuperscript{22}


\textsuperscript{22} Christian Recorder, September 29, 1866, and March 16, 1867.
Figure 1. Religious education classroom, Bethany Mission for Colored People (BMCP), October 1869, probably located on Brandywine St, Philadelphia. BMCP, Records, 1862-1936. Haverford College, Quaker Collection.

While activists made halting progress in the legal and electoral realm, their daily work was dominated by a commitment second only to their Christian faith: the belief that education would be the foundation of African American success. The first work was to assure black children a decent education, one that many parents believed could not be attained in Philadelphia’s segregated public school system. Charlotte Forten (Grimké), who would famously travel to the Sea Islands to sustain freed people’s schools after the war, began her teaching career as a tutor to her younger brother and sister at home. At public school “they are made to sit by themselves because their faces are not as white as the rest of the scholars. Oh! ... how it makes my blood boil,” Forten wrote. Families like the Fortens
were vital to the development of a large and extensive system of private schools for African American children, funded by private donations, ticketed student orations and performances, fairs, and all manner of creative community-based fundraising. Though Quaker communities had been an important source of funding for black schools, especially in the earlier decades of the nineteenth century, it was black community leaders’ unflagging commitment to education that sustained the Institute for Colored Youth, the Roberts Vaux School, and countless smaller, home-based centers of learning. After her own graduation from the Institute, Cordelia Jennings immediately founded her own school in her mother's home, attracting fifty eager, paying pupils. The links with white churches remained, however, in part because religious and secular education were typically intermingled. In 1871, the Bethany Mission for Colored People school received Bibles and one hundred hymnals from local Friends and Presbyterians.23

Students at the best-equipped black private schools competed for the highest standing in their classes, and the public watched the points tally as the semesters unfolded. As the Spring 1863 session came to a close, the Christian Recorder published the examination questions that Institute seniors had been given in Latin, Greek, Geometry, and Trigonometry, so that the community at large might revel in the vigorous intellects of their children. Imagine the joyful bewilderment of an aging Philadelphian, herself a survivor of slavery, reading that local young people could successfully “prove that cos. a = cos. b, cos. c + sin. b, sin. c, cos. A,” or could faithfully “translate the first three stanzas of Horace I. Ode IX” from the original Latin. Miss Caroline LeCount, her brother James, and Miss Rebecca

Cole had typically occupied the top three rankings in a given subject, but the final scores (out of 10)—Miss LeCount, 8.83; J. LeCount, 8.62; J.H. Rodgers, 8.40; Miss Cole, 8.21; E.Y. Dingle, 8.07—showed Caroline on top. Presented like daily box scores for baseball fanatics, the importance of education to the aspiring class of black Philadelphia cannot be overstated. Pupils like LeCount and Cole, whose skills as a teacher and a physician, respectively, would serve the community for decades to come, embodied the future of the “race.” They were symbols of all that could be accomplished by African Americans if they were only given an equal chance. Stories of achievement like these would become foundational in black American families, informing the rhetoric and practice of equal rights activism for a century and more. The successful model of black-administered, black-funded education would likewise establish an important touchstone in debates over whether full integration or a separatist black nationalism was the best path forward into the twentieth century.24

Black women’s activism in Civil War-era Philadelphia emerged from those families that had the means to provide private education to their daughters. Women like Caroline LeCount and Cordelia Sanders lived in relative wealth compared to the majority of black Philadelphia families, whose monthly incomes provided little beyond subsistence. School enrollment rates grew dramatically for pupils categorized as “negro and other races” in the Civil War era—between 1850 and 1870 enrollment grew by 80% across the country—but this still represented only one in ten black children in school by 1870. 80% of Americans classified “Negro and other” were illiterate in 1870 (as compared to 12% of whites). Private schools like the Institute for Colored Youth exemplified the shared investment of

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white Philadelphia Quakers and several black families that could provide funds for their own children and for poorer ones to attend. There was initially some concern that the increasing number of private schools for black pupils around the city would hurt the ability of older schools to remain solvent, but an 1856 survey found that attendance continued to grow apace even as more seats became available. Still, “irregular attendance of scholars” was a consistent problem, as children’s contributions to their family incomes remained a necessity throughout the city. Black female community leaders promoted scholarship and celebrated academic achievement more often than any other cause in the pages of the black press in this era. Universal education was their highest priority, even as the struggles for streetcar access and national black male suffrage continued in parallel.25

Philadelphia’s aspiring class of African Americans sought equal opportunities for their children and expected high achievement, but they cared broadly for the well-being of poorer black people as well. Dr. Rebecca Cole was one of the nation’s first black women to earn her medical degree, which she did at Philadelphia’s Women’s Medical College of Pennsylvania at the age of 21. After practicing medicine in South Carolina and Washington, D.C., Cole returned to Philadelphia to co-found the Women’s Directory Center. The Center provided free legal and medical services to poor women, as well as “programs aiding in ‘the prevention of feticide and infanticide and the evils connected with baby farming.’” The organization showed special concern for “women in cases of approaching maternity and of

desertion or abandonment” of children, and sought to decriminalize such acts by impoverished mothers in order to avoid compounding a complex problem. Cole implemented a holistic approach to improving her patients’ health and life circumstances that was unusual for her field in the nineteenth century, and reflective of a deep commitment to “give back” to her community.26

At the center of daily life for most black Philadelphians was the family home. With a simple brick façade on Fitzwater Street, Cordelia Sanders’ home was similar to scores of others in the neighborhood, two blocks west of Philadelphia’s Seventh Ward. Three stories of two rooms each, just twelve feet by fourteen feet, housed a dozen people in addition to visiting relations. Black households in the area represented professions and cultural habits that defy simple socio-economic classification: Sanders’ friends and contemporaries would commonly take in laundry or piecework, as well as performing local domestic work, while simultaneously studying to become classroom teachers, running small retail businesses, or—in a few cases—training as medical doctors. Households with mothers classified as “Negro” in the 1860 census had 18% more children than white households nationally, perhaps reflecting the need for additional labor in poorer households. Sanders’ scrapbook indicates she had time enough for perusing the latest fashion and style magazines, drafting poetry, and reading the daily news from both the black and the white press.27

As she grew, Cordelia Sanders became increasingly concerned with a matter of paramount import to young people, then and now: romance. Amidst the momentous


27 Bureau of the Census, Historical Statistics of the United States, Chapter B, 54. Family tree, Box 6, Folder 55, SCSV.
developments in the nation around her—Bleeding Kansas, southern secession, and most black men’s urgent desire to join the fight—Cordelia was also aware of the affections of young men. With the bulk of each day spent in the classroom, students got to know one another quite well; the protective environment of black schools and black churches did what they were intended to, which was to create a safe and inspiring space, despite the racist environment beyond the walls. At some point, possibly in years together at the Institute for Colored Youth, Cordelia became friendly with a bright and enthusiastic baseball player two years her senior, Octavius V. Catto. Charming and popular, possessing a spark of energy that set him apart from other young men, Octavius was a real catch. The son of a well-known pastor and orator, and a leading light in a new generation of black leaders, he energized the students and teachers around him. In late May of 1860, he expressed his feelings for Cordelia in a syrupy letter sent from his home on Lombard Street. “Highly Esteemed Miss,” he began, “I have received your album, with the accompanying note: And a glance upon one of its pages will acquaint you with the fruits of my effort.” Exchanging “friendship albums” was a common practice between young women in this era—each entering a page or two of new material, magazine clippings, poetry, and most importantly a display of fine penmanship, before trading back again. To be given the opportunity to make an entry in another person’s album was an opportunity to demonstrate one’s propriety, intellect, education, and status—a “visible sign of one’s gender and rank.” Such exchanges could “authenticate relationships”—so for a young woman to offer her album to a young man was not irregular, but it was noteworthy in a community especially conscious of respectability. After all, subsequent contributors would have full access to Octavius’ submission to this semi-public document. Cordelia had strong
feelings for Octavius. In return, his “untaught minstrelsy and want of skill” could only be excused, he wrote, by the “high regard” he had for her. His apology for “the deficiencies of the humble flower I have planted within your ‘garden spot,’” was no doubt happily accepted by Cordelia. Signed “Yours always and always yours,” Octavius’ letter may have been more explicit than his public offering to her album, but their relationship, thus authenticated, was clearly a powerful presence in the lives of these two young people.28

The rising generation of Philadelphia’s black activists struggled for equal rights, equal pay, and equal access to transportation, but they also struggled to preserve their dignity—their right to live full and joyful lives no less colored by love and affection than any other human beings’. In 1867, Octavius led an effort to register his baseball club—the Pythians—with the white national association of baseball players. Though the effort failed, the team performed remarkably well the following year against other black teams, and Octavius’s former classmate and fellow educator Caroline LeCount lauded the players with “handsome silk American flags” on “behalf of the ladies.” By this time, Cordelia Sanders had selected another suitor, and “the talk was” that Octavius and Caroline (“Liney”) “were romantically one.”29

The romantic entanglements of Institute alums were not left to smolder long before the broader struggle reasserted itself, however: on Election Day, 1871, after enduring

29 Biddle and Dubin, Tasting Freedom, 264, 369.
countless threats for his outspoken defense of black rights, Octavius was murdered in the street by an angry white Democrat. When Liney heard the news, she rushed to the nearby police station where her “piteous cries and pleadings’ caused the men to weep.” Identified in newspapers as the victim’s “betrothed,” she reportedly cried at his graveside “Octavius, Octavius! Take me with you.” Opposition papers like the Bellefonte Democratic Watchman brought a heinous clarity to the young lovers’ context, reporting: “Considering the fact that thousands of people are homeless and starving in Chicago and the West, a little less display over the funeral of the darkey CATO, in Philadelphia, the other day, would have been in good taste.”

Mourners wounded by the violent death of one of their most promising and powerful young advocates had to return to the business of everyday survival before long. Northern African American women “who had had such high hopes for improved economic and social conditions for their people after the Civil War, were quickly disillusioned.” Young women who found work as teachers were unusual in their ability to generate a reasonably dependable income; payroll records from the Institute of Colored Youth even suggest that female staff were paid at approximately equal rates as male teachers. But even families who could send their daughters to private school had to bear the economic realities of life in a post-war northern city, where prejudice continued to severely limit the opportunities of black men and women. Cordelia Sanders’ household had survived on an unusual source

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of income before the war: the riches of a southern slave owner. Her family’s adjustment to a post-war economy was perhaps especially difficult because of his recent death.31

Cordelia’s mother Sarah had been a slave belonging to Richard Walpole Cogdell of South Carolina. Cogdell’s travels to Philadelphia convinced him that the northern city—called “the only genteel place I have seen since I left Char[lestone]” by one of his contemporaries—was the perfect place to locate his somewhat unconventional second family. Over the span of their lives Sarah Sanders bore ten of Cogdell’s children, several of whom grew up in the house at 1116 Fitzwater Street that he purchased for them in the late 1850s. He visited often; in fact, Cogdell spent his last hours in Philadelphia with his children before he died. In his will, the Charleston planter bequeathed “all of my estates” to them, including the Fitzwater house and all its household goods. In what might have been enough money to provide for years of comfort, Cogdell’s estate included a $4,000 insurance policy held by the Planters & Mechanics Bank of Charleston. Unfortunately for the Sanders children, the money “was invested during the existence of the Confederacy in Confederate Stock.” What seemed a wise investment to bankers in the spring of 1862 had by that fall become a rapidly depreciating asset—so much so that the failing bank happily sold off the policy at a cut rate to “specie creditors,” and the Sanders claim to the money became “subjugated” to that of the creditors. In a lengthy reply to multiple inquiries by Cordelia and her sister Sarah over the course of more than a year, the attorney attempted to explain the saga, but the upshot was that the Sanders’ inheritance had been already spent in the

31 Sylvia G.L. Dannett, ed. Profiles of Negro Womanhood, 1619-1900, v.1 (New York: M.W. Lads, 1964), 84. Records do not indicate the amount of time worked by each employee, only a monthly salary total. In addition to teaching duties, instructors (along with students) helped maintain the facilities of the school. The gendered division of domestic labor may have put more of this burden on the women’s shoulders than their male colleagues. “Institute for Colored Youth,” Manuscript Collection 1220, Box 2, Quaker Collection, Haverford College.
defense of slavery. The provision Cogdell had planned for his Philadelphia family, like the Confederacy itself, had “vanished into nothing.”

The Sanders’ daughters experience of relocation and financial struggle illustrates the breadth of concerns that could face black women in Philadelphia in this era. Movement to a free state from South Carolina surely felt like relief on some level, though family and friends were left behind in Charleston. The fact that the Sanders’ could stay together made their circumstances relatively positive, yet their livelihood and safety were dependent in large part on the largess of Cogdell. His ability to move freely between the South and the North was sharply curtailed by the onset of war, a change that may have generated complex emotions for Cordelia and her siblings. Did they love Cogdell? Letters between old friends of Cogdell’s and the Sanders daughters seem to indicate genuine affection between Cogdell’s mixed-race family and his white southern contacts, with no apparent shame or exclusion based on color. While the Sanders daughters’ sentiments are unknown, they did not shy from the legal battle over Cogdell’s estate after his passing. Perhaps emboldened by the Emancipation Proclamation and the progress of the Union war, or perhaps simply confident in the loving bond between themselves and their deceased father, the young women assertively claimed monies belonging to them as Cogdell’s beneficiaries. Cordelia and her sister Sarah sent letters to his attorney in Charleston asking for funds to pay for their father’s funeral expenses. The Sanders family complicates the clean lines of North and South, white and black, even pro- and anti-slavery, that typically organize the Civil War era

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in the American imaginary. A white southern slave owners’ mixed-race children matured within the most elite African American circles, and then put their education to use defending the principles their father’s white family fought to destroy.33

The rolls of the Institute for Colored Youth were littered with the names of Philadelphia activist families, especially in the area of education, but there was no shortage of direct political action on the part of Institute graduates, either. Octavius Catto was such a threat to white Democrats that Frank Kelly, a member of the Moyamensing Fire Company that was implicated in other murders and assaults on black Republicans, gunned down Catto in the street for his outspoken support of President Lincoln’s party and black male suffrage. During the war, the Republicans’ power had grown exponentially on the national level, in part because so many Democrats had left the Congress when their states seceded. Black Philadelphians enthusiastically embraced the Republican banner—particularly when Lincoln explicitly tied the Union cause to emancipation with his proclamation in late 1862. African American Republicans had vigorously advocated black male suffrage since well before the war, and with Union victory in 1865 their calls for full and equal citizenship grew even louder. Harriet Forten Purvis, daughter of free black abolitionist William Forten and spouse of abolitionist Robert Purvis, co-founded the mixed-race Pennsylvania Female Anti-Slavery Society and was a staunch advocate of black male suffrage. But when Purvis attended a pro-suffrage lecture by a southern Judge Pitkin in 1866 she reacted with a challenge to the practice of advocating multiple, overlapping civil rights agendas. Purvis

33 Biddle and Dubin, Tasting Freedom, 421-422. Correspondence, Box 2, Folders 3 and 7, SCSV, Library Company of Philadelphia. It is unclear whether the Sanders children attended the Institute for Colored Youth; Cordelia may have had schooling in Massachusetts or New York, as well. See Maillard, Whispers of Cruel Wrongs, 21-22.
“gave an impromptu speech at the door on her way out,” wondering “how useless is all this applause ... when I, weary as I am, am forbidden to take a seat in the cars[?]” In her view, the committee that had been designated to deal with streetcar access “had done nothing for fear of hurting the Republican Party.” Purvis identified a problem of scale in this instance: national gains might prove irrelevant if they could not be manifest at the local level.34

Though some white women activists like Elizabeth Cady Stanton allowed racism to divide the post-war suffrage movement in the lead up to passage of the Fifteenth Amendment that guaranteed black male suffrage, Purvis framed the “problem” of black male suffrage in very different terms. The challenge in Purvis’ mind was not one of determining which group of Americans (black men or white women) deserved the right to vote sooner, but how the struggle for voting rights would help abate the daily struggles of life in a racist culture. White PFASS members “were less pessimistic and expressed their determination to labor ‘with renewed zeal,’” but Purvis and other black women “could not share their assurance of success” in the deeper struggle for social equality. While black men and white women focused their energy on vital national issues, some black women were most interested in the local, practical effects of activism in a northern city that still felt unwelcoming to black Americans. While deeply invested in securing black male suffrage, women like Purvis were not shy about naming the limits of resistance in the electoral realm.35 Purvis’ concern about the local realization of national civil rights gains illustrates a vital characteristic of northern black women’s resistance to injustice. While lauding the speaking abilities of men like Frederick Douglass and Judge Pitkin, these activist women

35 Ibid.
measured rights not by the loftiness of rhetoric, but by progress observed and felt on the sidewalks of their neighborhoods.

Yet local measures of rights were different for women and for men. In a letter to the *Philadelphia Press* in the winter of 1864, abolitionist William Still recounted a story of the abuse of black female passengers by a white conductor enforcing the rules of segregation. When “two elegantly-dressed young women stepped into a car” on their way home from a lecture, one of them refused to stand on the cold and dirty outdoor platform instead of taking a seat in the car. The conductor stopped the car, “seized her, and actually, by physical force, thrust her out of the car.” Tellingly, at this point in his recollection of events, Still did not raise the inborn equality of American citizens, nor did he appeal to the simple dignity owed a human being stepping in from the cold. Still offered instead his fundamental problem with the conductor’s behavior: “the father of this young woman pays several hundred dollars taxes annually; keeps his horse and carriage, and lives as nicely as most respectable citizens.” The woman deserved respect, and a seat on the car, because her father was a respectable tax-payer. Through the logic of patriarchy, the conductor’s abuse of her body and dignity were a direct assault on a man. While it is perhaps possible that Still employed this patriarchal reasoning strategically, playing on the prejudices of *Press* readers to strengthen his credibility, Harriet Forten Purvis’s later assessment of the Republican Streetcar Committee—chaired by Still—suggests that Still was not so clever as all that. While his own daughter Caroline Still Wiley would become one of the first black female physicians in the country, and his friend and boarder Frances Watkins Harper famously advocated women’s unique role in lifting the republic to “stand foremost among the nations of the earth,” Still’s invocation of respectability reflected his male-dominant
framing of the struggle against racial injustice. Indeed, Still wrote that his primary reason for recounting the campaign was to offer “a defence of William Still,” as other Streetcar Committee members had “wilfully [sic] slandered” him by questioning his commitment to the state law that eventually integrated the streetcars in 1867.36

Still’s production of the history of the streetcar struggle helped to generate and preserve the notion that the freedom struggle generally was a movement of righteous men aided by supportive women. The Reconstruction-era context in which Still wrote—and in which Purvis resisted—was the first time since the nation’s founding that the basic nature of citizenship was so hotly and publicly debated. But the basically conservative ethos of black respectability had developed in the antebellum period, in which “most discussions about citizenship consistently ignored the status of black women.” Historian Nancy Isenberg has argued this absence was deliberate on the part of white males in power, as the explicit consideration of black women’s rights or privileges “would have vividly revealed the degree to which arbitrary discrepancies were drawn among different groups of citizens, suggesting the political order perpetuated distinct ranks or castes.” A writer in Boston’s anti-slavery Emancipator and Republican pronounced the “strong similarity between the status of white and black women” in the North in 1849, offering technical legal equality as evidence, but omitting entirely the existence of prejudice in jurisprudence. Similarly, judges considering cases involving black women “preferred to retain a sharp dichotomy” between


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sex and color “rather than indicate the possibility of various gradations” of citizenship. While the electoral and juridical bodies dominated by white males lacked clear definitions of black women’s citizenship, these citizens had little trouble defining themselves: black women framed their citizenship in ways that were firmly rooted in their own inextricable experiences as black and as women.

Purvis’ frustration with male-dominated political committees that were long on rhetoric and short on results was the reverse side of the far more typical expressions of hopefulness and faith by black women in the North during Reconstruction. The nation that had won the war, abolished slavery, and would guarantee black male suffrage and equal treatment under federal law within a few years was a place of opportunity and great pride for Philadelphia’s African American population. For women, this pride took the form of a broad optimism for the future of the United States, combined with local activism to guarantee delivery on the promises of Union victory and expanded civil rights at the national level. This “neighborhood nationalism” would shape black women’s relationship to the civil rights struggle for decades to come.

Although a focus on the local scale has illuminated much recent scholarship on the twentieth-century freedom struggle, the same is only beginning to occur in studies of the nineteenth-century. John Dittmer’s foundational Local People (1995) firmly established the

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37 Nancy Isenberg, Sex and Citizenship in Antebellum America (Chapel Hill: UNC Press, 1998), 112. The arbitrary division between race and sex remains in today’s judicial system, as black women must often frame discrimination lawsuits according to their race or their sex, but not both. Sexual preference and gender expression raise additional “problems” for a legal system that has historically preferred standardization to realism. Black women in academia often have to choose between identities—black or woman—to fit disciplinary and departmental categories, as well. See R. K. Best et al., “Multiple Disadvantages: An Empirical Test of Intersectionality Theory in EEO Litigation,” Law & Society Review 45, no. 4 (December 2011): 991–1025, and Laura E. Hirshfield and Tiffany D. Joseph, “We need a woman, we need a black woman: Gender, Race, and Identity Taxation in the Academy,” Gender & Education 24, no. 2 (March 2012): 213–227.
importance of on-the-ground experience, intelligence, and action in the many campaigns to undermine Jim Crow in Mississippi in the 1950s and 1960s. Recognition that the “modern movement originated from below—or in response to local imperatives—rather than following orders from above” helped to complicate a popular historical narrative focused on nationally-known males and draw the focus back to the local people who responded to “the individual atrocities that plagued their towns.”38 This dynamic was clearly at work for black activists in Philadelphia in the Civil War era, as the degree of attention paid to streetcar policies demonstrates. But the Civil War itself lent a unique hue to local civil rights advocacy that was different from the freedom struggle of the Cold War and Vietnam eras. Added to frustration with local atrocities was the tangible reality that after the Emancipation Proclamation, black men were fighting and dying to defeat the centuries’-old evil of slavery. The same women who protested streetcar segregation named themselves the Ladies’ Union Association (LUA), taking it upon themselves and their own fundraising capacities to tend to the wounded US Colored Troops returning to Philadelphia in the last half of the war. Some portion of the coins they gathered in churches to aid the sick found their way into the fare boxes of Philadelphia’s private streetcars, as the women traveled to hospitals and homes throughout the city for their work. After the war, they took on the national project of educating and clothing freedpeople in the South with local contributions. In December, 1866, a committee of the LUA including Caroline LeCount and Emilie Davis accepted 21 dresses, 30 pairs of shoes, and 14 pounds of sugar, among other items, to send to Charleston, South Carolina—the antebellum home of the Sanders’ and

38 John Dittmer, Local People: The Struggle for Civil Rights in Mississippi (Urbana, Ill.: University of Illinois Press, 1995), 173.
many other Philadelphia African American families. A “sense of the justice of our cause” combined with the women’s feelings of “duty and privilege” in assisting veterans and their families illustrated the mingling of Christian charity, patriotic commitment, and local concern that stirred their hearts. With gross receipts for 1867 totaling only $221.86, the Ladies’ Union Association nevertheless spread their neighborhood’s generosity across the nation. At a fair held to gather funds and supplies in Philadelphia, the assembled voted to present a gift of a “handsome black velvet dressing gown, cap and slippers” to Major General Benjamin Butler of Massachusetts. His letter of thanks to LeCount linked the local group’s gift and their activism to the cause of national black male suffrage: “These gifts ... are at once the exemplar and evidence that the race of colored men have the high virtue of gratitude,” Butler observed. “Who shall say such men so willingly periling their lives to save the Country, are not fit to take part in choosing their own ruler[?]”

That national pride would be dressed in local garb is not surprising in an era when travel even to a nearby city was a major undertaking; many Americans never set foot in another state in their lifetimes. An individual’s experience of “nationhood” can only ever happen in some local place or another. In fact, it is one’s commitment to and love of locality that makes her national pride possible. Political scientist Morton Grodzins argued that “populations are loyal to the nation as a by-product of satisfactions achieved within nonnational groups, because the nation is believed to symbolize and sustain these groups. ... One is loyal not to nation but to family, business, religion, friends. One fights for the joys

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39 Ladies’ Union Association, *Report of the Ladies’ Union Association, of Philadelphia, formed July 20th, 1863 ...* (Philadelphia, Pa., 1867), Historical Society of Pennsylvania. Like Still, Butler seems to have read women’s actions as expressions of their male family members’ character rather than their own, but the link between local and national scales of justice remains relevant.
of his pinochle club when he is said to fight for his country.” No doubt the neighborhood nationalism of women like Purvis, LeCount, and Sanders was tied to their lives in school, at church, and in their family homes. But their nationalism operated in a way that was distinct from that of so many white male pinochle clubs: white males could (and do) convince themselves that everyone in the nation shares their own local experience, colored as it is by whiteness, maleness, and other markers of privilege. But because African Americans’ very legitimacy as members of the imagined national community was in doubt among the white majority, African American women and men had to operate with the faith that the ideals underpinning their imperfect nation would prevail in the end. When Frederick Douglass famously asked in 1852 “What, to the slave, is the Fourth of July?” he exposed the hypocrisy of patriotic white Americans who celebrated the concept that “all men are created equal” while holding millions of them in bondage. And yet, like the Philadelphia women who anticipated a “brighter coming day,” Douglass concluded that, “notwithstanding the dark picture I have this day presented of the state of the nation, I do not despair of this country.”

In 1876, a black Congressman from Florida noted “the tardy but in the end full and complete vindication of the sublime simple announcements of the Declaration of Independence”—an observation that was unfortunately premature.40

The link between nationalism and local experience thus runs most profoundly in the opposite direction for black women in the Civil War era—from the national to the local. The federal government’s ability to usurp local prejudices and minor turf wars made it the most effective scale for justice activism. “Black women had to fight for their rights both as women and as blacks,” historian Alison M. Parker notes. “This double burden encouraged them to develop a broad range of reform strategies and to articulate and work for them separately as well as in unison with others.” The simultaneity of many struggles is clear from the pages of The Christian Recorder and the hundreds of petitions black and white women sent to state and federal legislatures in this period. “Black women fought for constitutional amendments to advance and protect their civil rights and then for federal legislation to enforce those rights.” Black Philadelphians were arguably the most active population of free people advocating abolition, and worked ceaselessly for the Republican Reconstruction amendments that ultimately won black male suffrage and equal legal protections. But we need not choose one scale of justice at the expense of the others. Harriet Purvis did not, and neither should historians of the long African American freedom struggle.\(^41\)

The nation was indeed imagined by Americans from their local street corners, church pews, butcher shops, political clubs, and charity fairs. Often overlooked, however, is the way in which the neighborhood was and is also an “imagined community.” For the

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\(^{41}\) On “scales of justice,” see geographer Nancy Fraser’s examination of local, national, and global claims for justice in *Scales of Justice: Reimagining Political Space in a Globalizing World* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2009).
women of the Ladies’ Union Association, the streetcar stop was much more than a patch of
ground at the corner of Broad and Fitzwater where a white conductor ruled his tiny
fiefdom; it was a site of resistance and a homefront battleground for realizing the meaning
of the Civil War.
CHAPTER 2.

Embracing Violence: Northern Women and the Call for Black Troops

On May 16, 1863, subscribers to Philadelphia’s Christian Recorder received a gruesome update on the latest battle in the rebellion against the government. General Hooker had recrossed the Rappahannock to his prior position outside Fredericksburg, Virginia, where he found that “the enemy had fallen back, leaving hundreds of wounded behind, and his dead unburied.” Among the broken trees, still smoking from their barrage by Union artillery, Hooker found “a very large number of charred remains.” The northern reporter remarked of the Confederate dead that “the sufferings of the poor wretches must have been terrible.” Chancellorsville may have seemed remote to the African American washerwomen, seamstresses, and cooks making their way to work along Broadway or Market Street that morning some two hundred miles away from the battlefield. Yet the war threatened to enter these women’s lives in a dangerously intimate way that summer, as for the first time in their nation’s history, black men had been called en masse to join the United States Army.42

In Pennsylvania, many able-bodied African American men were anxious to support what they viewed as a war to emancipate slaves. Their mothers, wives, and daughters, unable to enlist, would have their commitment to the cause measured by their willingness to sacrifice the men of their families to the violent and righteous purposes of the state. The conflicting emotions black Philadelphians felt about sending their young men to fight became perhaps most heated a few weeks later when rumors began to fly that Confederates were nearing the state line. Governor Andrew Curtin called on Pennsylvania

42 Christian Recorder, May 16, 1863.
men to defend the border, and black men of Philadelphia jumped at the chance. Emilie Davis, a black woman of 24, recorded in her diary in mid-June that she “saw a company of colerd [volunteers]” who “looked quite war like” gathering around her church during services. Her friend Jacob C. White, Jr., frightened her and her companion Nellie “by saying ... that a great many of his dear frins expected to go to [war] at 12 o clock after meeting.” Emilie asked whom he meant, and he replied, “all the boyes.” Whether it was her stomach or her heart that ached is unclear, but Davis was “quite sick” the night of the governor’s appeal. A day or two later she accompanied the young men of her neighborhood, her church, and her school to the train station to say goodbye. But on the 18th she wrote, “When i came home this morning the first thing i heard ... was that the boyes had bin sent back.”

One hundred fifty African American men had traveled to Harrisburg to enlist, but Governor Curtin refused their service, sending them home. Davis confessed she had mixed emotions: “I feel glad and sorry.” She was disappointed for her friends, but felt relief that the terrifying violence had been held back a while longer. “We all are so thankful that our boyes are all hom again.” Her relief was short lived, however, as many of those men rejected by the State of Pennsylvania turned instead to the federal government, joining up at Camp William Penn outside Philadelphia later that summer.

43Judith Giesberg, ed., Emilie Davis’s Civil War: The Diaries of a Free Black Woman in Philadelphia, 1863-1865 (University Park, Pa.: The Pennsylvania State University Press, 2014), 45-47. Frederick Douglass later addressed men who had been rebuffed by Governor Curtin, reminding them of the different scales on which the freedom struggle operated: “The State is not more than the nation. The greater includes the lesser. Because the State refuses, you should all the more readily turn to the United States. ... But the broad gates of the United States stand open night and day. Citizenship in the United States will, in the end, secure your citizenship in the State.” “Enlistment of Colored Men,” Douglass’ Monthly, August 1863. There are many unanswered questions about Emilie Davis’s life and family relations. Precisely which church she attended and in which neighborhood she lived are unclear. See Ann D. Gordon, “Getting History’s Words Right: Diaries of Emilie Davis,” The Pennsylvania Magazine of History and Biography 139, No. 2 (April 2015): 197-216.
Northern black women, like their white counterparts in the North and the South, were vital to the mobilization and sustenance of male soldiers during the Civil War. Women led work in churches, benevolent societies, and private households to provide clothing and supplies to the front, and to care for sick and wounded soldiers, their widows, and their orphaned children at home. Some white women argued that their war-time service justified a broad expansion of women’s rights: Elizabeth Cady Stanton expected that the war would not only free the slaves of the South, but also emancipate white women in a “simultaneous chorus of freedom.” Black women asserted that their own contributions to the war effort helped to earn black male suffrage and civil and social rights for black women, emphasizing the need to elevate black men to the status of white men for the benefit of their community as a whole. More than 8,600 African American men from Pennsylvania fought for the Union; in Philadelphia, African American women formed groups like the Ladies Union Association and the Ladies’ Sanitary Association of St. Thomas’ African Episcopal Church dedicated to their needs and to the expansion of civil rights. Black women in public stood firmly in favor of black men’s participation in the Union war.44

What is unknown is what black women said about black enlistment in the privacy of their homes, or in quiet conversations crossing town to change the dressings of injured veterans of the US Colored Troops. The call to arms that allowed African Americans to take equal part in the state mechanisms of war was a powerful draw to women committed to abolition. But could African Americans trust the same federal government that had actively

enforced the Fugitive Slave Law for nearly a decade? Donning a uniform was a strong symbol of manhood, but would black soldiers be nothing more than human shields for more highly valued white troops? Would husbands and brothers have any better luck finding work or traveling safely on the streets of Philadelphia after risking their lives in cities and towns hundreds of miles away? The choice confronting northern African American men and women as to whether to stake their lives on the military success of the US government was not a simple one.45

These were questions that African Americans themselves asked, and hints at some answers can be located in newspaper articles, published sermons, and contemporary black women’s literature. Widely followed black orators and writers like Frederick Douglass and Frances Watkins Harper shaped conversation among Philadelphia’s black elite. Although black women produced few materials that explicitly addressed black enlistment in 1863, women’s considerations of patriotism generally, their working definitions of gender roles, and their actions in the months and years that followed offer important clues to their opinions of black mobilization.

To support black men’s military service, black women needed to become comfortable imagining the state as a legitimate purveyor of force that was not aimed at African Americans. Even if that shift could be justified ideologically as a necessary step toward expanded freedom, men’s enlistment in the military jeopardized their families’ security due to the chance of injury or death. While unquestionably committed to abolition,

45 Thoughtful gender analyses of African American men’s experiences of the Civil War include A. Kristen Foster, “‘We Are Men!’: Frederick Douglass and the Fault Lines of Gendered Citizenship,” *Journal of the Civil War Era* 1, No. 2 (June 2011) and Carole Emberton, “‘Only Murder Makes Men’: Reconsidering the Black Military Experience,” *Journal of the Civil War Era* 2, No. 3 (September 2012): 369-393.
each northern African American family had to assess the risks of war at the local, individual level. Like so many elements of African American women’s history, the views of northern black women on the timing and conditions for enlistment are veiled in what black feminist scholars have termed the “intersectionality” of black women’s relationships to power: the oppressions operating on black women were more, and different, than the sum of racism and sexism. In the intersection of identities there was a unique experience that cannot be fully understood through the expressions of black males or white females.46

In the case of black service in the Civil War, the views of black men and of white women are well known; black women’s experience has been lost. While men’s demands for equality did not explicitly exclude black women, black soldiers defended their roles as protectors and providers for their families using gendered language. In April 1864 Tillman Valentine of the Third US Colored Infantry wrote to his wife Annie in Chester County, Pennsylvania, promising her that “if i ever live to get home” he wanted to “live like a man and give over all low and mean habets.” Valentine counted financial provision for his family toward “living like a man,” and often mentioned his frustration at black soldiers’ unequal pay. Consistent with white gender norms of the era, the rhetoric and symbols of patriarchy shaped black men’s claims to social equality with white men. As a formative experience for the social standing of black men after slavery, the Civil War generated a powerful mythology of martial manhood for African Americans, reinforcing for blacks the tropes of militarism that had long animated white participation in state-sanctioned violence.47


47 Brian Taylor, “A Politics of Service,” 455-456. On the links white Americans drew between soldiery, masculinity, and citizenship, see: Amy S. Greenberg, Manifest Manhood and the Antebellum American Empire
This chapter considers the perspectives of northern African American women when black Americans were first afforded the opportunity to send their men to the army on a broad scale. When Philadelphia’s African American mothers, wives, and sisters prepared men’s clothing and provisions and accompanied them to nearby mustering sites, those women enacted their national identity in a state at war. While scholars rightly describe the inseparability of black Americans’ patriotism and their expectation of legal equality, few have probed the dynamics of that pairing. Many northern African Americans maintained a deep skepticism of state-sponsored violence, as it was so frequently aimed in their direction. After nearly a century of legalized subjugation by white Americans and their government, an active black counterpublic of women and men debated whether mass militarization was indeed black people’s patriotic duty, even as their leaders and their churches pressed men to enlist. I am suggesting here that uncritically celebrating black enlistees and their female family members as “patriots” contributes to a progressive, “healing” narrative of US race relations while failing to recognize the complexity of (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2005), esp. Chapter 4 and Conclusion; and Stephanie McCurry, “War, Gender, and Emancipation in the Civil War South” in Lincoln’s Proclamation: Emancipation Reconsidered, eds. William A. Blair and Karen Fisher Younger (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2009), 120-150. For African Americans, see Emberton, “Only Murder Makes Men.” On the enforcement of sex and race norms in patriotic national narratives, see Anne McClintock, “No Longer in a Future Heaven”: Women and Nationalism in South Africa,” Transition 51 (1991): 104-123. Throughout this chapter, the lowercase term “state” is used in its most general sense to refer to the apparatus of the federal government. Quotation from Jonathan W. White, Katie Fisher and Elizabeth Wall, “The Civil War Letters of Tillman Valentine, Third US Colored Troops,” The Pennsylvania Magazine of History and Biography 139, No. 2 (April 2015): 184, 180.

Identity “enacted”—whether sexual, gender, racial, or national identity—refers to Judith Butler’s theorization of “performativity,” in which the repetition of “politically enforced” practices over time generate a sense of permanence and “nature” in what is nonetheless socially constructed behavior. Butler, Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity (1990, repr., New York: Routledge, 2006, Kindle edition), location 3589. Barbara J. Fields raises a pertinent example of social construction regarding nineteenth-century British and American abolitionists: by accepting slaveholders’ terms for debate—that skin color was a reasonable way to classify humans—abolitionists contributed to the reification of “race.” Had they refused skin color as a meaningful characteristic, instead embracing human equality, for instance, the historical trajectory of Western white supremacy may have been significantly different. See Fields, “Slavery, Race and Ideology in the United States of America,” New Left Review 181 (May 1990): 117.
encounters between African American women and the state. Patriotism was and is not the same for all Americans. A family's circumstances could place limits on even the most ardent black abolitionists; African American women's principal commitments—to church, to family, to their community—initially worked against their deep affection for their country. When popular opinion coalesced in favor of black mobilization, however, black women bolstered men's service with their own commitment and sacrifice, rooting their national pride and belonging in the shared experience of war. In the process, northern African American women accepted—and created—a link between militarism and citizenship that would have profound effects on their relationships to black men and to the American state in the decades to come.49

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In the early decades of the American nation the links between a person's "patriotism" and his participation in war violence were not so fixed as in later centuries. Early national and antebellum children's textbooks contain accounts of the American Revolution in which Americans—"ever virtuous"—are "instruments of fate and reluctant warriors driven by British perfidy to a war of self-defense." More surprising than nationalist sentiment, however, is a popular text from 1805 that "celebrates William Penn's peaceful negotiation with Indians and purchases of their land, as opposed to Fernando Cortez's ruthless violence in colonial conquest." The widespread use of such texts in white children's instruction suggests that in the decades before the Civil War Americans defined

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49 Multiple fissures existed among black leaders on the issue of enlistment. Brian Taylor described the resistance that pro-enlistment speakers like Douglass encountered from other civil rights activists who sought "not to restore the old Union, but to usher in a new, reformed one in which they would be treated as men and citizens." Some black activists saw enlistment as a "bargaining chip" in the broader struggle for equal rights and less a duty owed to their nation. Taylor, "A Politics of Service," 451-456. Kidada E. Williams, https://twitter.com/KidadaEWilliams/status/565143093855657986 (accessed March 5, 2015).
patriotism in terms of group cohesion instead of individual action. It was one’s fidelity to community ideals—exceptionalism, divine ordination, and freedom from tyranny—more than direct participation in war that confirmed one’s love of country. “Like-mindedness” or community spirit was the most important measure of patriotism before the Civil War. Even individual rights—strictly limited to landed, white male heads of household—were enjoyed only because “both self-interest and the common good were served through virtue and achieved in a hierarchically ordered universe through unity with the Almighty’s great plan.” While love of country could be manfully expressed through military service, patriotism was not exclusively the domain of soldiers.⁵⁰

African American women had a unique relationship to this patriotism that celebrated the “common” good: their individual rights were severely limited, when present at all. Connections to American war violence were perhaps more heavily emphasized in black people’s expressions of patriotism than in whites’, as racism prevented most black people from establishing their American bona fides through other civic practices like voting or jury service. Leading black male writers Martin Delany and Frederick Douglass frequently cited participation in American wars to validate American identity, a strategy that white Americans—particularly recent migrants—pursued frequently after the Civil War.⁵¹

⁵⁰ Even the culture’s powerful reverence for George Washington was, in this period, attributed to his humility and his service to the common good, as opposed to his mythic accomplishments as a virtuous individual or war hero. Washington’s cherry tree exploits, for instance, were likely not invented until the late-nineteenth century. Cynthia M. Koch, “Teaching Patriotism: Private Virtue for the Public Good in the Early Republic” in John Bodnar, ed., Bonds of Affection: Americans Define Their Patriotism (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1996), 32-51.

White women’s roles in mobilization took various forms, from the preparation of soldiers’ clothing and supplies to, in some cases, posing as males in order to enlist and fight. Whether knitting socks or hosting “refreshment saloons” for passing regiments, many white women in Pennsylvania expressed their commitment to the Union’s war effort through contributions of time and hospitality. Historian Judith Giesberg suggests that women’s local expressions of physical support were prototypical of the national US Sanitary Commission established in June 1861. The social pressure to act on behalf of the Union war effort was such that the Sanitary Commission deemed it “unnecessary to do more than announce that there is a real and immediate occasion” for women’s “best exertions” in order to generate volunteers. “Loyal women” adapted existing sewing circles, Dorcas Societies, and “Sociables” to the creation of war goods. Blankets, quilts, “cushions for wounded limbs,” and slippers were all in short supply at military hospitals, and women readily obliged the need. The collection of “checker and backgammon boards” and “books, for desultory reading” helped wounded soldiers convalesce in comfort and return to the front more rapidly. Women’s work, thus directed, created a powerful gendered practice of militarism in northern culture. Bringing the war to the parlors and church fellowship halls of Philadelphia’s women, the support work of the Sanitary Commission and its countless local analogues made the everyday tasks of clothing repair and social calls into acts of war. The reproductive labor of women secured the very sustenance and lives of men, women, and children throughout the country. President Lincoln praised women’s “direct practical value to the nation, in this time of its trial,” concluding “there is no agency through which voluntary offerings of patriotism can be more effectively made.” In addition to their
concern for male relatives’ safety, women organized their own social lives around the war.\textsuperscript{52}

African American women encountered and generated the same social pressure to service in their circles, yet patriotism was a fraught topic for them, as it pitted dearly held commitments against one another. The first was their dedication to Christianity. Numerically dominant in church communities around the country, women held a primary role in the moral instruction of their families, and the enforcement of religious norms. Black women’s patriotism needed to accommodate a higher commitment to a God who promised freedom from slavery. Racked by the violence of slavery and racism for centuries, many African Americans had embraced Christian nonviolence as a path to personal and communal freedom from bondage and prejudice. The promise of relief and reward in the afterlife was a powerful draw for individuals whose entire lives were ordered by their condition of servitude. When black women responded nonviolently to the daily indignities and abuses of life in a white-supremacist culture, they demonstrated power over their own minds and bodies. Their imitation of Christ, as they saw it, was a refusal to be governed by the unjust rules of a state and culture that did not recognize their full humanity as God did.\textsuperscript{53}

\textsuperscript{52} Judith Giesberg, “Waging War Their Own Way: Women and the Civil War in Pennsylvania,” \textit{Pennsylvania Legacies} 13, No. 1-2 (June 2013): 16-27. Obedience to middle-class gender conventions kept most women involved in the war through such “domestic” work, though over time the exigencies of war would shift their production work from woolen socks to artillery shells. See Giesberg, \textit{Army at Home}, Chapter 3. U.S. Sanitary Commission, \textit{To the Loyal Women of America} (1861), Library Company of Philadelphia. Amy Kaplan described antebellum links between domesticity and militarism, in which men and women did not inhabit “separate spheres,” but were in fact “national allies against the alien” outsider. In general, “the determining division is not gender but racial demarcations of otherness,” a logic that reinforced white solidarity in the elimination of Indians in the west—though in the context of the Civil War, white secessionists became “foreigners,” as well. Amy Kaplan, “Manifest Domesticity,” \textit{American Literature} 70, No. 3 (Sep., 1998): 582.

\textsuperscript{53} On white women’s roles in early national and antebellum American religion, see Christine Leigh Heyrman, \textit{Southern Cross: The Beginnings of the Bible Belt} (New York: A.A. Knopf, 1997). For northern black women, see Evelyn Brooks Higginbotham, \textit{Righteous Discontent: The Women’s Movement in the Black Baptist Church, 1880-1920} (Cambridge, Mass: Harvard University Press, 1993). The church was the most influential
Linked to black women’s firm belief in God’s deliverance from slavery was their political commitment to abolition. Political abolitionism was the practical expression of African American women’s theological commitment to personal and communal freedom from sin. When the state repeatedly took the side of slaveholders, as it had with the passage of the Fugitive Slave Act in 1850 and the *Dred Scott* decision of 1854, the gap between America’s ideals and its government’s policy was thrown into stark relief for African Americans. President Lincoln’s Emancipation Proclamation, which took effect in Confederate territory on January 1, 1863, was the most promising sign yet that the gap might finally be closing.

The third commitment, complicating the other two, was a love of country not so different from that of white Americans. Many black women held a determined commitment to the ideals of the American nationalist project dating to Crispus Attucks’ martyrdom in the Boston Massacre. African Americans understood their own claims on American national identity to be equal to those of white people. As women were not allowed by rule and custom to be full citizens in this era, their identities as Americans were to some degree acquired by proxy from their fathers and husbands—an arrangement that white women’s force on African-American public opinion in the Civil War era. In its various denominational forms, the Christian church served as the ultimate arbiter of right and wrong, particularly when the government could not always be depended on for justice. Church historian Bettye Collier-Thomas argues that, “irrespective of social class or prominence within the community, all members were expected to conform to church law.” Among Methodists and Baptists, “committees were organized to review the charges brought against women and men who failed to meet church standards for manners and morals, and for those who did not abide by the rules governing marriage.” Collier-Thomas, *Jesus, Jobs, and Justice: African American Women and Religion* (New York: Knopf Doubleday Publishing Group, Kindle Edition, 2010), locations 1037-1041. Violence in the context of slave uprisings was a topic of ambivalence among African American Christians, as some considered it an expression of God’s divine judgment on slave owners.
rights activists challenged repeatedly. As non-whites, black women’s social recognition as true Americans was thus even more precarious than white women’s.\textsuperscript{54}

While black people for generations had longed to overcome their country’s system of bondage based on skin color, the vigorous antebellum intellectual life of free blacks in the North had generated rich and deep philosophies around the practices of war and violence. Philadelphia’s black middle-class looked to their pastors and to the Bible for moral context. Central to the ideological questions surrounding black enlistment was a long-standing debate among northern African Americans about legitimate and illegitimate uses of violence. A family that could avoid the violent exchanges so common on the street achieved an important marker of middle-class respectability. If a husband was found to treat his wife or children with brutality, he faced public shame and censure by the community. Self-defense and violence in the course of protest were more complicated matters, and the subject of much debate. State violence, or the “legitimate” violence perpetrated by police and military forces in pursuit of order and the common good, was often experienced by African Americans as a tool of oppression; enslaved and free blacks, poor people, women and children could rarely depend on government officers as an entirely benevolent force. Instead, black Americans created an institution of their own—the church—that they would depend on when the United States failed to recognize their inherent equality.

The influence of the black church on African American social and political life in the nineteenth century cannot be overstated. In 1859 thousands of black Philadelphians were

enrolled in black-led Protestant “Sunday Schools” meeting at least weekly for religious education, and fully eighty per cent of black households attended Sunday services in this era. The AME Church’s weekly publication, the Christian Recorder, had more than 800 paying subscribers in the mid-1860s; literary scholars suggest that shared reading practices of the era exposed exponentially more people to the Philadelphia paper’s doctrinal and social influence. At least one third of subscribers were women, and three-quarters of subscribers resided outside Pennsylvania and New Jersey, indicating its broad national reach. The relatively large financial investment of a subscription ($2.25 per year, plus postage) suggests that many subscribers were among Philadelphia’s African-American elite, though subscribers were “not just potential readers but also ... conduits” for other household members, neighbors, co-workers, and friends.55

55 Benjamin C. Bacon, “Statistics of the Colored People of Philadelphia,” (Philadelphia: Board of Education of “The Pennsylvania Society for Promoting the Abolition of Slavery,” 1859), 10. Theodore Hershberg, “Free Blacks in Antebellum Philadelphia” in Allen F. Davis and Mark H. Haller, eds., The Peoples of Philadelphia: A History of Ethnic Groups and Lower-Class Life, 1790-1940 (Philadelphia: U Penn Press, 1973), 121. Eric Gardner notes the problematic assumption frequently made by scholars that black periodicals had a black readership, and the inverse, that white periodicals had a limited black readership. His demographic study of Christian Recorder subscribers supports the notion that the vast majority of subscribers were black, but he rightly critiques the “received wisdom,” rather than evidence, that historians depend on when we assume nineteenth-century print materials directly represent the views of those reading the materials. “Remembered (Black) Readers: Subscribers to the Christian Recorder, 1864–1865,” American Literary History 23, No. 2 (2011), 231-232, 243-244, 252n3, emphasis in original. Trish Loughran challenges the idea of any truly national “print culture,” at least before the 1830s, when transportation and communication technology began to become extensive and affordable enough for Americans to consistently relate with people beyond their own villages and towns. Word of mouth and private letters were more effective vehicles of information than newspapers and broadsides during the Revolutionary era, and even these personal “texts” often fell victim to poorly maintained and disconnected regional roads. “Print was of course important,” Loughran argues, “but it was only indispensable to a small part of the population” (21-23). Loughran, The Republic in Print: Print Culture in the Age of U.S. Nation Building, 1770-1870 (New York: Columbia University Press, 2007). Steven Hahn sees “kinship, labor, and circuits of communication and education (especially rumor) as fundamental components of slave and freed politics,” asserting these non-literary modes of “politics” must be attended to for a clear understanding of African American experience. Hahn, A Nation Under Our Feet: Black Political Struggles in the Rural South, from Slavery to the Great Migration (Cambridge, Mass: Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2003, Kindle edition), location 90. On the oral construction of kinship and claims to ownership of objects in the context of slavery, see Dylan C. Penningroth, The Claims of Kinfolk: African American Property and Community in the Nineteenth-Century South (Chapel Hill: UNC Press, 2003).
Publications by the black church thus provide a fairly representative sample of the ideological debates in which Philadelphia’s African Americans were engaged in the mid-nineteenth century. The *Christian Recorder* provides a large collection of the words of black women, including semi-regular columns on family and devotional life, as well as occasionally explicit expressions of their political views. The essays and speeches of widely known abolitionist and women’s rights advocate Frances Watkins Harper were frequently printed in the pages of the *Recorder*. Fanny Jackson Coppin, who would become principal of Philadelphia’s Institute for Colored Youth in 1869, believed “the high tone and moral character of this little journal is doing much for the elevation of the mass of colored people North and South.” The paper fielded opinions on issues as diverse as Biblical interpretation, the “virtue of borax,” and the movement to enfranchise black men with revisions to the Pennsylvania state constitution. Much like the *Chicago Defender* in the twentieth century, the *Christian Recorder* was considered the paper of record for politically and culturally engaged African Americans in the era of the Civil War.⁵⁶

It is especially noteworthy, then, that dissenting views on black men’s entry into a war that might end slavery are all but absent from the pages of the *Recorder*. While the dynamics of black Americans’ relationship to the nation generated a broad range of views before the war, a sharp consolidation of opinion seems to have occurred when President Lincoln allowed African Americans to join the Union army; there are few columns or editorials suggesting anything but enthusiasm for black men’s mobilization. There are clues between the lines, however, that some black women and men voiced caution—perhaps

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outright dissent—in response to the staunch patriotism of Delany, Douglass, and the editors of the Recorder.  

A regular writer to the Recorder identified only as “Brister” was skeptical about bellicose white Americans’ sudden interest in black freedom. Suggesting that black Philadelphians preserve a “solid front ... against the evils of slavery and prejudice,” Brister reasoned “if we were united, it would promote and encourage patriotism, love of race, and result in the establishment of an ‘African-American nationality.’” While some scholars have read such statements as an emergent black separatism, Brister’s earnest promotion of patriotism is worth noting. Echoing President Lincoln, Brister reminded the Recorder’s readers that “a house divided against itself must fall,” and “so it is with a nation. If the white people will cut us off, and then call us inferior, let us support our own business men. ... Let us be like the Jews in every particular,” Brister concluded, “especially in making money.”

Skepticism over enlistment was manifest in concerns about racial inequality in army pay and circumstances of deployment. Many women seem to have been concerned with the personal impact of black enlistment. Fear of war violence, loss of life and limb, and the hardships of life without their partners, fathers, and sons probably led some black women to urge their men to stay home. Others encouraged enlistment, speaking of the higher cause of ending slavery, choosing to focus on the hopeful future instead of the frightening

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57 “Calling duty to one’s country second to duty to God, the paper always emphasized the former.” Hazel Dicken-Garcia and Linus Abraham, “African Americans and the Civil War as Reflected in the Christian Recorder, 1861-1862” in Words at War: The Civil War and American Journalism, eds. David B. Sachsman, S. Kittrell Rushing, and Roy Morris (West Lafayette, Ind: Purdue University Press, 2008), 250.

58 “The Arts and Sciences,” Christian Recorder, February 2, 1861. While a handful of men and women with the surname “Brister” can be located in AME church materials of the era, there is no scholarly consensus around just who he or she was. On late twentieth-century historians seeking endorsement of 1960s-era separatism in Civil War era sources, see Wilson J. Moses, The Golden Age of Black Nationalism, 1850-1925 (Hamden, Conn.: Archon Books, 1978), 11.
present. Class dynamics colored these responses, as one’s relative economic position might limit or expand their choices. Mobilization was different for men than for women, not merely in terms of physical demands, but also in the kinds of questions each had to answer. While Emilie Davis worried over the fate of her personal friends and schoolmates, Frances Watkins Harper hoped white Americans would “look the real cause of the war in the face and inspire the government with uncompromising earnestness to remove the festering curse” of slavery from the nation.59

Commitment to Christianity could usually merge easily with political abolitionism for African Americans, but the combination was not entirely without debate. While human slavery was clearly evil, African American thinkers before the war were far from unanimous in their strategy for its destruction. In 1829, when David Walker published his “Appeal to the Coloured Citizens of the World,” influential black abolitionists applauded the author’s motivation without endorsing what they read as a call for violence. The Christian Recorder suggested that its readers “consider God’s temperance” while reviewing Walker’s suggestions. News of Nat Turner’s Virginia uprising in 1831 was received with sympathy and understanding, but also hesitation at the violent use of firearms.60

59 Letter from Frances Ellen Watkins Harper, 1860[1861?], in William Still, The Underground Rail Road: A Record of Facts, Authentic Narratives, Letters, &c ... (Philadelphia: Porter & Coates, 1872), 780. Lorraine Dowler and other feminist theorists have argued that the process of “militarization” for war is both literal preparation for combat and the social preparation for war: “The militarization of the everyday is central to the extension of state power into the daily and, even intimate, inter-actions of its governed population.” Thus, “subjective forms of violence, such as wars, always reach deeper into societies than conventional reports would portray.” Women’s encounters on the “home front” with “every day forms of violence, such as the structural violence of poverty, hunger and social exclusion, can be waged with a wider variety of means and by a wider variety of actors than previously imagined.” Referencing the work of Cynthia Enloe, Dowler describes how “everyday” militarization “influences the creation of dominant narratives, which constructs the experiences of a few as the norm and erases the experiences of others,” a phenomenon clearly visible in the historiography of the Civil War with regard to African American women. Dowler, “Gender, Militarization and Sovereignty,” Geography Compass 6/8 (2012): 490–491.

This balancing act may be explained in part by the efforts of middle-class black churchwomen to improve themselves and their communities through gendered acts of respectability. A standard of masculine behavior adhered to by many middle-class Americans of the era was a “restrained” manhood, measured by moral uprightness, reliability, and bravery. Constant threats to the safety and livelihood of black men who worked for white employers or faced surveillance by white police officers inclined many men to choose restraint over reaction, paralleling abolitionists’ recognition of the limits of violent slave rebellion for affecting structural change.  

Restraint was never precisely synonymous with pacifism, however, least of all for black men whose female family members were at risk of abuse for their skin color and their sex. Middle-class men and women drew a distinction between defense of one’s self or family, and organized violence on a large scale. Recent studies of black abolitionists demonstrate that views of the efficacy of physical violence were shaped by both moral and practical concerns; though black Christians had long embraced the New Testament’s message of nonviolence, a logic of “collective self-defense” emerged in the 1850s, when free black communities in the North found themselves physically at odds with southern slave catchers. Frederick Douglass had by then begun to actively encourage physical resistance by African Americans, slave or free: “If any one should attempt to take me into Slavery, I should strike him down—not with malignity, but as complacently as I would a bloodhound, and think I was doing God’s service.” Still, a collective concern for escaped slaves is distinct from the organized activities of a state-sponsored police or military force, which, in

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61 Greenberg, Manifest Manhood, 12, 109. Giesberg, Emilie Davis’s Civil War, 8.
execution of the Fugitive Slave Law, worked in direct opposition to black community interests.62

In the antebellum era, black Philadelphia abolitionists James Forten and his son-in-law Robert Purvis embraced moral suasion over violent insurrection as the path to abolition. The women of the Forten-Purvis family were deeply engaged in abolitionist activism, as well, regularly conducting work in churches and voluntary associations in the anti-slavery effort. The family’s commitments were well known. In 1855, Boston abolitionist and African American leader William Cooper Nell published *The Colored Patriots of the American Revolution*, in which he described the boyhood experiences of James Forten at the time of the Revolution. Forten’s mother Margaret is an important character in the story, modeling a sentimental, patriotic femininity. Nell foregrounds Margaret’s brave sacrifice and maternal suffering in order to establish African Americans’ equal claim to belonging in the nation. Like many black writers on the topic of the Revolution, Nell reflected on the heroic achievements of black men on the side of the Continental Army. Nell’s narrative does not assume, however, that an individual’s love of country made him a tool of the state for which he fought.

After a brief formal education, James Forten was working at a grocery store when war broke out between American colonists and the British. Just 10 years old when the Declaration of Independence was signed, Nell notes that James’s “young heart [was] fired with the enthusiasm and feeling of the patriots and revolutionists of that day.” His father

Thomas had recently died, but James begged his mother Margaret to let him join the fight. “Yielding to the earnest and unceasing solicitations of her son, with the firmness and devotion of a Roman matron, but with a heart then truly deemed American,” Margaret Forten “gave the boy of her promise, the child of her heart and her hopes, to his country.” In a sentimental mode that would flood the literary marketplace a few years later during the Civil War, Nell relayed Margaret’s decision to sacrifice for her country: “upon the altar of its liberties she laid the apple of her eye, the jewel of her soul.” Her feminine contribution thus delivered, Margaret took her place among the other war heroes with a display of patriotic womanhood. It was the spirit of the “patriots” that animated Margaret and her son, but as the boy’s story unfolds, it becomes clear that the Fortens made a distinction between their commitment to their homeland and to the nascent American state.63

Shortly after joining Commander Stephen Decatur aboard the Royal Louis in 1780, James “found himself amid the roar of cannon” and “the smoke of blood” when attacked by the British ship Lawrence. Offered passage to England, where he would be freed and enjoy “equality and happiness, for ever,” James proclaimed, “No, No! ... I am here a prisoner for the liberties of my country; I never, NEVER, shall prove a traitor to her interests!” “What patriotism more lofty, devoted, and self-sacrificing!” Nell remarked. With a “full knowledge of the wrongs and outrages” white Americans were “then inflicting upon his brethren and by the ‘ties of consanguinity and of wrong,’” James’s feeling was, “America, with all thy faults, I love thee still.” After several months aboard a prison ship, James was spared

63 William Cooper Nell, The Colored Patriots of the American Revolution, With Sketches of Several Distinguished Colored Persons ... (Boston: Robert F. Wallcut, 1855), 166-167. While Nell’s narrative is likely an elaboration of stories passed orally through the Forten-Purvis family, his account is based on a eulogy delivered at James Forten’s funeral by his son-in-law Robert Purvis. Nell remarks that Margaret Forten “survived long after [James] had reached the years of maturity”; it is possible Purvis had heard these stories from Margaret herself.
transport to the Caribbean and returned home to his mother. “Her mind was relieved,” Nell concludes, “by his appearing in person.”

Nell’s tale, published in the same year that Kansas’s dueling territorial legislatures fomented the national debate over the westward extension of slavery, was part history and part contemporary commentary. Set in the dramatic context of the Revolution, Margaret’s “firmness and devotion” marked her as a patriot, even as she and her family rejected white Americans’ “wrongs and outrages”—emotions that would easily resonate with northern African Americans living under the fear and confusion of the Fugitive Slave Law. Free for generations—possibly since the seventeenth century—the Fortens had made their own way in North America for far too long to consider any other place their “native land.” But Margaret taught her son that he answered to a higher authority than the state. James understood that he was accountable to God and to the republican ideals claimed by the Declaration, that “all men are created equal.” Margaret’s heart was “truly deemed American,” but her head still recognized that the government was not the same as the nation it represented. Nell’s readers in 1855 could recognize among themselves the experience of a woman who loved her nation’s ideals and hated her state’s twisted expression of them.

White abolitionist Wendell Phillips, in his preface to Nell’s Colored Patriots, noted another admirable quality of black patriots in addition to their steadfast loyalty: their sturdy manhood. “Some things set down here” in Nell’s history “go to prove colored men

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64 Nell, Colored Patriots, 167-169. Captain Beasley, “as a token of his regard and friendship,” asked the commander of the prison ship to be sure to include James in a prisoner exchange. James had been enlisted as a playmate to the captain’s son while aboard ship. James frequently quipped later in life: “Thus ... did a game of marbles save [me] from a life of West India servitude.”
patriotic though denied a country,” Phillips noted. “And all show a wish, on their part, [to] prove themselves men, in a land whose laws refuse to recognise their manhood.” Nell joined many early black historians in bolstering black male claims to what historian Amy Greenberg has termed “martial manhood.” This mode of male social authority derived not from control and self-mastery as “restrained” manliness did, but from sheer power and domination. The strict hierarchy and dramatic physical life of military men shaped this alternative standard of masculine behavior, and both men and women could be drawn to its qualities. Black men, whose authority over white men, women, and even themselves had been consistently disallowed by American law and custom, gained access to an especially potent symbol of manhood when they committed state-sanctioned acts of violence.65

Both patriotism and faith had sustained northern African Americans for generations, and both were leveraged in the rhetorical fight against slavery. While black people’s commitment to Christianity is well documented, parsing their feelings about the American nation requires special attention. The word “patriot,” for instance, was occasionally used in the black press to describe any person who loved his or her country, but more often, it referred specifically to rebellious colonists in the American Revolution. “Patriotism” could be a positive—if not especially noteworthy—virtue in a well-behaved black child. Advice in the Recorder from February 1861 admonished mothers “never allow your child to whine or fret, or bear grudges,” and “early inculcate frankness, candour [sic], generosity, magnanimity, patriotism, self-denial.” Editors applauded Liberia’s founders for

their “spirit of Christian patriotism and philanthropy” suggesting religious team-spiritedness more than nationalism *per se.* “Patriotism” was used alongside “nationalism” at times, but not as a synonym. Henry McNeal Turner later coined the phrase “race patriotism,” meaning both cultural pride and loyalty to an imagined community in a specific geographic space: the United States.66

At the time of the US invasion of Mexico, Frederick Douglass stated bluntly his critique of President Polk’s racist imperialism, setting patriotism in opposition to justice and morality. “I make no pretension to patriotism,” he remarked to a crowd in Syracuse in 1847. “So long as my voice can be heard on this or the other side of the Atlantic, I will hold up America to the lightning scorn of moral indignation. In doing this, I shall feel myself discharging the duty of a true patriot.” African American perspectives on American wars have generally fallen into two categories: the “integrationist/patriotic” view, often associated with Booker T. Washington in the era of the Wars of 1898, and “Black nationalism,” which Stanford defines as “self-reliance” and recognition “that U.S. foreign policy is not divorced from the domestic experiences of African Americans.” Indeed, for subscribers to this position, like Douglass in 1847, “the experiences of African Americans are viewed as an authentic barometer for assessing U.S. motives abroad.”67

By this measure, Douglass’s anti-imperialist rejection of war with Mexico is consistent with his later call for abolitionist war against the Confederacy. Speaking in 1849 of the death of an American general in the US-Mexican War, Douglass remarked, “I would

not care if, to-morrow, I should hear of the death of every man who engaged in that bloody war in Mexico, and that every man had met the fate he went there to perpetrated upon unoffending Mexicans.” At home in the United States, he said, “there are three millions of slaves in this land, held by the United States Government, under the sanction of the American Constitution, with all the compromises and guaranties contained in that instrument in favor of the slave system. ... With eighteen millions of freemen standing upon the quivering hearts of three millions of slaves, my sympathies, of course, must be with the oppressed. I am among them, and you are treading them beneath your feet.” Douglass viewed President Polk’s invasion of Mexico much as he viewed southern secession from the Union: as a means to the unconscionable extension of slavery in time and space.

Douglass often used the term “patriots” in his eponymous *Paper* to describe leaders of the American Revolution, but the term also described acts in direct opposition to American leadership. When slave catchers attacked the town of Christiana, Pennsylvania, under the cover of federal law in November 1851, women and men at Zion’s Church in New York held the government accountable for its “base attempt to interfere with the common law” of self-defense. Every free American ought to “contribute his mite to defend these Christiana patriots against the lawless expression of a cruel, besotted and self-condemned

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68 *The Liberator*, June 8, 1849. Historian Frederick Merk argued that hawkish white leaders were more concerned with territorial expansion in general in the 1840s than with the expansion of slavery in particular. Polk administration Democrats “had no very strong objections to slavery extension,” Merk acknowledges, but “their immediate ambition was territory.” Merk, “Dissent in the Mexican War,” *Proceedings of the Massachusetts Historical Society* 81, Ser. 3 (1969): 126. Historian Nicholas Lawrence has more recently noted how scholars have overlooked the breadth of the peace movement during the Mexican War that led to an expansive anti-imperialist discourse in the 1850s. “The U.S./Mexican War evoked a cacophony of dissenters who were neither “cowed” nor “frightened” into supporting what they considered to be an anti-republican, imperialist enterprise.” Anti-slavery figures like Douglass, William Lloyd Garrison and Henry David Thoreau were some of the most vociferous critics of US imperialism, linking their anti-imperialism to their abolitionism. Nicholas Lawrence, “This boa-constrictor appetite of swallowing states and provinces”: Anti-Imperialist Opposition to the U.S./Mexican War,” *South Central Review* 30, No. 1 (Spring 2013): 75.
Executive.” The moral lines were clear: state actors—in particular, President Fillmore—did not represent “America” simply because they controlled the levers of government. When the state ordered “American freemen to be incarcerated for striking for liberty,” it forfeited its authority over the free people it abused. Churchgoers gathered at Zion’s Church measured state acts by their interpretation of the nation’s founding, not by the political expediencies of its current office holders.69

Abolitionist and avowed patriot Martin Delany argued that the United States belonged as much to black people as to whites, pointing to African Americans’ armed defense of the state in other circumstances. “There is no responsibility attended with more personal hazard, and consequently, none for which the country owes a greater debt of gratitude,” Delany wrote in 1852. “Amor patria, or love of country, is the first requisition and highest attribute of every citizen; and he who voluntarily ventures his own safety for that of his country, is a patriot of the purest character.” He who “shoulders his musket, girds on his sword, and faces the enemy on to the charge” is the “favorite [son] of a favored people.” In contrast to the pacifism of Quaker abolitionists, Delany was anxious to see black men using weapons of war. Men who defended their nation had the most compelling claims to that nation’s legal protections, and should be proud of their achievements.70

Frederick Douglass believed there was much to be cherished about the country black men had defended: “our vast continent subdued and peopled in fifty years, with a

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70 Martin Robison Delany, The Condition, Elevation, Emigration, and Destiny of the Colored People of the United States (1852), section VIII. Orm Øverland has called this process ethnic “homemaking,” in which members of a marginalized ethnic group claim belonging in a national imaginary according to the length of their inhabitance. Øverland, Immigrant Minds, American Identities: Making the United States Home, 1870-1930 (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2000), 8.
State on the Pacific, ... our numberless schools and churches, our colleges and asylums, ...
our Collins’ steamers and merchant ships”—those products of “our religion, our
civilization, and our civil and social life” that ought to be lauded. Critique and celebration
were compatible to abolitionist leaders before the Civil War. The women and men who
purchased black newspapers and attended black churches understood, with Douglass, that
“he is a lover of his country who rebukes and does not excuse its sins.”

Firsthand experience of national military service, however, was largely unknown to
African Americans at the start of the Civil War; after the Revolution, the federal Militia Acts
of 1792 included only “free able-bodied white male” citizens among the nation’s eligible
warriors. Tales of long-past heroism were the closest most black men of enlistment age had
ever come to knowledge of the regular army. An 1859 commemoration in Boston
celebrating Crispus Attucks’s “signal leadership” in the American Revolution was typical of
the special recognition assigned to black actors in prior wars. A young Charlotte Forten, the
Philadelphia native who would later support the US Colored Troops in South Carolina,
performed a patriotic song with her school’s Attucks Glee Club. Stories of Attucks’ bravery
were recited alongside denouncements of the government’s recent Dred Scott decision. The

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71 Militia Act of 1792, Second Congress, Session I. Chapter XXVIII, http://www.constitution.org/mil/mil_act_1792.htm (accessed November 5, 2017). Douglass’s repeated evocation of “our” civilization and Delany’s strong defense of duty to country illustrate the conservative nature of “black nationalism” in the middle-nineteenth century. Wilson J. Moses argued that efforts by black activists in the 1960s and 1970s to locate radical leftist critique in the words of historical black actors were inaccurate and misleading. From Delany through Du Bois, Moses argued, themes of “African civilizationism” reflect a commitment on the part of historical leaders to the “uplift” and “improvement” of benighted black peoples outside the Western world, as opposed to a celebration of traditional African cultures. Similarly, Moses argued that the extreme separatism of black colonizationists (including Delany in 1859-60) was far from typical. “Black separatism ... usually referred only to a simple desire to see black people making independent efforts to sustain themselves among hostile peoples.” Thus, to Moses, “black nationalism” in the mid-nineteenth century was not mutually exclusive of American patriotism; African Americans could, and did, hold a range of beliefs incorporating elements of both. Moses, The Golden Age of Black Nationalism, 11. Douglass, speech in Syracuse, New York, 1847.
links Delany had drawn between war and black citizenship were not obvious to his audience; he needed to state them aloud to nurture them in the minds of the black public at large.72

If violence on behalf of the state was still an unusual context in which to perform black citizenship, violence against the state was a familiar subject of debate among black thinkers. After the sometime preacher and radical immediatist John Brown led his ill-fated slave rebellion at Harper’s Ferry, West Virginia, in October 1859, Brown’s wife Mary Ann traveled through Philadelphia on her way to visit him in prison. Staying at the home of Underground Railroad leader William Still, Brown apparently met and befriended his friend and boarder, Frances Watkins (later Harper). Watkins was impressed with Brown’s bold support of her husband, despite the ongoing threat of violence to her and her surviving children. Writing to Brown in November, Watkins comforted the white woman, reminding her that John Brown’s violent uprising was brave and honorable. Calling Mary Ann “the noble wife of the hero of the nineteenth century,” Watkins remarked that a “republic that produces such a wife and mother may hope for better days. Our heart may grow more hopeful for humanity when it sees the sublime sacrifice it is about to receive from his hands.” The future of the nation was not endangered by the violent attack on the state that John Brown had brought to Harper’s Ferry; it was in fact secured. Humanity itself was ennobled by Brown’s violence on behalf of the oppressed. “Not in vain has your dear husband periled all,” Watkins wrote, for “from the prison comes forth a shout of triumph

over that power whose ethics are robbery of the feeble and oppression of the weak, the
trophies of whose chivalry are a plundered cradle and a scourged and bleeding woman.”
Watkins enclosed a few dollars “as a token of my gratitude, reverence and love” for Mary
Ann and her husband. When Mary Ann met with her husband in December, she told a
reporter he was “a martyr in a righteous cause, and [she] was proud to be the wife of such a
man.” The gallows “had no terrors for her or for him.” After John Brown’s execution,
Philadelphia’s Republican Mayor Alexander Henry refused to allow the funeral train to stop
in his city, disappointing African American mourners and supporters there.73

Frances Watkins’ embrace of John Brown’s armed rebellion—an effort that, if
successful, would have slain white slave owners by the thousands—stands in stark contrast
to her powerful rejection of violence in another context. Watkins’ poem “The Slave Mother”
(1854) describes the terror and grief of an enslaved woman whose small son is about to be
taken from her for sale. “Pale with fear; / Her boy clings to her side, / And in her kirtle
vainly tries / His trembling form to hide.” Her owner’s “cruel hands … rudely tear apart”
the only love she has ever known. The monstrous slavers “tear him from her circling arms,
/ Her last and fond embrace,” in an act of callous violence that powerfully summarized the
evil inherent in human slavery for Watkins’ many readers.74

Like the slave narratives of Frederick Douglass, Harriet Jacobs, and others, images of
violence against the innocent helped convince skeptics and sustain abolitionists throughout
the North. Watkins’ depiction of the slave mother reflected the lived experience of

Ellen Watkins Harper to Mary Ann Day Brown, November 14, 1859, in William Still, The Underground Rail
York Daily Tribune, December 3, 1859. Giesberg, Emilie Davis’s Civil War, 8.
74 Frances Ellen Watkins, “The Slave Mother” in William Wells Brown, The Black Man: His
Antecedents, His Genius, and His Achievements (Boston: James Redpath, 1863), 161-162.
countless women and children, but as with Douglass’ and Jacobs’ works, it served a political as well as an artistic purpose. Appealing to white readers’ love for their own children, Watkins condemned the violence of slave owners who “tore” at the bodies and souls of the people they oppressed. Set beside her letters to Mary Ann Brown, however, it is clear that Watkins drew a sharp distinction between types of violence: the unjust abuse of enslaved people was reprehensible, while killing for the sake of those people was “heroic” and “sublime”—a “shout of triumph” over the power of slavery.

By 1860, however, abolitionists entertained hope that the state had finally moved to their side. Just as the most virulent secessionists believed Abraham Lincoln’s election guaranteed a war over slavery, many black northerners saw his ascendance to the presidency as cause for great expectation. On March 9, 1860, the Christian Recorder announced Lincoln’s inauguration with near God-like veneration. “The day of tolerating traitors at the seat of government is over,” the editor declared. “The abettors of anarchy may no longer lift their heads in the presence of the successor of Washington.” To Philadelphia’s black elite the election of the anti-slavery Republican was every bit as revolutionary as southern Democrats had feared. Some black leaders heard a clarion call that the institution of slavery was in its final days. Though Lincoln himself worked assiduously to convince white Americans, particularly in the border states, that his election was no threat to their property or their desires for national reconciliation, African Americans throughout the North recognized that a moment of unprecedented opportunity was at hand.75

75 Christian Recorder, March 9, 1860.
By the summer of 1861, eleven southern states had seceded and active hostilities had commenced between the Union and the Confederacy. Companies of young white men gathered in towns large and small, and free black men longed to join them in what promised to be the adventure of a lifetime. White recruiters in Philadelphia tapped every nerve they could in their efforts to meet Pennsylvania’s enlistment quota. “Young men of Philadelphia,” they intoned in newspapers and flyers, “reflect upon the duty that you owe your country, in this her hour of peril.” If patriotism was not enough, men might be drawn by “MONEY! MONEY!! MONEY!! —$315,—All those in want of Money and a Gum Blanket, and wish to serve their Country, can do so by calling at No. 627 Chesnut street.” If love of country or economic gain failed to bring enough men to fight, a blow to their manhood might shame them into service: “Let it not be said I was drafted,” warned giant block letters on a broadside pasted near downtown recruiting stations.76

The hold of slavery over the United States was finally in real danger, and black men anxiously awaited the chance to strike a fatal blow. That chance did not emerge as quickly as many hoped, however. Frederick Douglass expressed his dismay at the army’s refusal to enlist black soldiers in May 1861, but assured readers of Douglass’ Monthly that “the present war may, and in all probability will reach a complexion when a few black regiments will be absolutely necessary.” Whatever lingering threads of obligation to “moral suasion” still existed for other abolitionists, Douglass made clear “we do most earnestly urge our people everywhere to drink as deeply into the martial spirit of the times as possible” by organizing companies, buying weapons, and learning to fight. “Let us not only be ready on

call, but be casting about for an opportunity to strike for the freedom of the slave, and for the rights of human nature.” For many black men and women, the commitments of Christianity, abolitionism, and love of country had finally aligned.77

Mounting losses on the battlefield generated the conditions Douglass longed for in late 1862, when Lincoln issued the Preliminary Emancipation Proclamation and tied the Union war effort rhetorically and politically to the abolitionist cause. The all-black 54th Regiment Massachusetts Volunteer Infantry was formed in March 1863, and a few months later, the US Army officially began recruiting men to the US Colored Troops. While a few cynics feared black troops would be pushed to the front as human shields for white soldiers, many black people greeted the opportunity to fight as a step toward the end of slavery and the beginning of equal citizenship. There is little evidence of cowardice or disinterest in military service among northern African Americans, despite many white northerners’ expectation of such behaviors. The question advanced by black northerners in public, at least, was not whether to join the fight, but how to join it.78

Civil rights leaders in the North expected military service to the US government to break down the final barriers to legal equality for African Americans. How could Lincoln offer anything less than full citizenship and voting rights to a man who risked his life for the

78 “Black Regiments Proposed,” 452. While enlistment was technically the responsibility of the individual states, nearly all black troops in the Union Army became part of the federal US Colored Troops, as opposed to numbered state regiments. (The famed 54th and 55th Massachusetts Volunteers are the exceptions that prove the rule, as their organization pressured the federal government to establish procedures for national enlistment of African American men.) This arrangement allowed the federal government to segregate troops by race. Dudley T. Cornish, The Sable Arm: Negro Troops in the Union Army, 1861–1865 (New York: Norton, 1966). Classic works on the achievements and experiences of the US Colored Troops include Cornish, and: Benjamin Quarles, The Negro in the Civil War (Boston: Little, Brown, 1953); James M. McPherson, The Negro’s Civil War: How American Negroes Felt and Acted During the War for the Union (New York: Vintage, 1965); and Ira Berlin et al., Freedom: A Documentary History of Emancipation, 1861–1867, ser. 2: The Black Military Experience (Cambridge: Cambridge Univ. Press, 1982).
Union? Less certain was when the government would enforce that equality, and how much effort would be required to extract it from the white government. Black writer and activist William Wells Brown wrote that, while “the colored people of the country rejoice in what Mr. Lincoln has done for them, ... they all wish that Gen. Fremont had been in his place.”

Major General John C. Fremont had declared free the slaves of any rebels in Missouri once that border state was secured by Union forces in August 1861—a move reversed by the Lincoln administration. Lincoln reversed himself just over a year later, but similarly did nothing for the slaves of masters loyal to the Union. USCT Private George E. Stephens would later express his frustration with continued northern racism and Lincoln’s political, not humanitarian, calculations. Stephens considered the Emancipation Proclamation a strange “creature—an abortion wrung from the executive womb by necessity”—a dead letter that was nothing more than “a fulmination of Executive folly and indecision.” Still, Stephens confessed at the start of the war that his “own bosom ... swells with the hot blood of a revenge which nothing but the blood of a slaveholder can satiate.”

Perhaps the greatest concern of potential enlistees was the army’s policy on prisoners of war, for black women and men knew that capture by Confederates promised enslavement, or worse, to any captured black soldier. In response to these fears, President Lincoln issued General Order No. 233 in July 1863, hoping to convince African Americans that the federal government would show no prejudice in its efforts to retrieve captured soldiers, and that the Confederacy should be under no illusion that mistreatment of black

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troops would be tolerated. It would be another year before an act of Congress guaranteed equal pay to black soldiers.\textsuperscript{80}

By August 1863, however, Frederick Douglass felt he had to address the grumbling among free African American men and women about the terms under which men should join the Union service—an echo of the concern for equality that in previous decades had caused even Douglass himself to hold back enthusiasm for his country’s works. Some, Douglass told a Philadelphia crowd, believed that if they “endure all the hardships, perils and suffering” of war—if they “confront rebel cannons, and wring victory from the jaws of death, they should have the same pay, the same rations, the same bounty, and the same favorable conditions every way afforded” to white men. While Douglass reassured the audience “I am content with nothing for the black man short of equal and exact justice, ... nothing can be more plain, nothing more certain than that the speediest and best possible way open to us to manhood, equal rights and elevation, is that we [enter] this service. For my own part,” Douglass decided, “I hold that if the Government of the United States offered nothing more ... than bare subsistence and arms, considering the moral effect of compliance upon ourselves, it would be the wisest and best thing for us to enlist. There is something ennobling in the possession of arms, and—we of all other people in the world stand in need of their ennobling influence.” Douglass made clear that there was nothing quite like a gun in a black man’s hands to “ennoble” him, whether he had legal equality or not. Joining the state in the organized violence of war was, in Douglass’ view, the “speediest and best” path to equal rights.\textsuperscript{81}

\textsuperscript{80} “To Colored Men!” Letters Received, 1863 – 1888, Records of the Adjutant General’s Office, 1780’s-1917, Record Group 94, National Archives. See Figure 1.

\textsuperscript{81} “Enlistment of Colored Men,” Douglass’ Monthly, August 1863.
Why did Douglass feel the need to convince black men of the importance of enlistment more than two years into the war, several months after President Lincoln had finally made the war a referendum on slavery with his Emancipation Proclamation? While Douglass’ remarks are nominally addressed to the black men of Philadelphia, women attended his speech and read his words published in the press. Douglass appealed to black women, as well as to men, when he constructed for his listeners an image of a black soldier who was respected, powerful, and manly in his defense of his country. When Douglass pronounced the “ennobling influence” of a weapon in a man’s hands, he tapped a deep well of American masculine culture that must have been powerfully compelling to men whose lives were constantly monitored and constrained by white-supremacist law and custom. Promising “an association of gentlemen” would be formed to protect their women, Douglass declared “You are a son, and want your mother provided for in your absence!—a husband, and want your wife cared for!—a brother, and want your sister secured against want! I honor you for Your solicitude ... Your mothers, your wives and your sisters ought to be cared for.” “Martial manhood” in which “strength, aggression, and even violence” signaled a proper male’s governance of females and lesser men resonated powerfully for the gathered black men, but it also held a powerful appeal for black women.82

assisted them in imagining that man’s partner—a woman empowered to pursue education, employment, and social freedom in a world after slavery. The generation of a new, militarized black man in the popular imagination would help to foster enlistment, to be sure, but it also helped to reinforce a black masculinity and femininity that would limit the path black women might have taken to their own equal rights in the decades ahead.83

The entrenchment of the militaristic male in African American public life influenced the lives of women (and men) during the war and for generations to come.84 Middle-class northern black women embraced what they saw as an opportunity to gain rights and respect by the actions of black men. Also evident, however, was a realism that the act of joining a white male army could not, in and of itself, end centuries of racist subjugation and violence borne by African Americans. The critique of state-sponsored violence that would become more prominent in the decades following the war was under-stated and cautious in the 1860s; northern African Americans understood what was at stake on the national scale even as they weighed regional and neighborhood concerns. By the end of 1863, a unity of purpose drove the words and actions of black Americans who decided to fight for their own freedom, whatever the cost. The appeal of martial manhood and the potency of joining in war violence appear to have worked, in tandem with pressure from the black church, to convince black families that their private risk was worth the potential for public


Philadelphia men filled an entire regiment of the USCT, with another half full, in August of 1863. Another dozen regiments would be raised by the end of the war. Northern black women’s recorded words and actions over the remainder of the war reveal few signs of dissent; rather, women made the war their own in the contexts that were available to them.85

Black women expressed their patriotism according to their abilities and circumstances. Some women were public proponents of war, frustrated that they could not take up rifles themselves. Sojourner Truth penned new verses for the popular marching song “John Brown’s Body,” celebrating black troops’ bravery and power:

Look there above the center, where the flag is waving bright;
We are going out of slavery, we are bound for freedom’s light;
We mean to show Jeff Davis how the African can fight,
As we go marching on.

Susie King Taylor, the first black US Army nurse, served unpaid with her husband’s regiment, the First South Carolina Volunteers. Truth threw her notoriety and speaking ability into the fight for abolition, and Taylor put her very body in the line of fire.86

Distance from the front offered no protection from economic violence for two Chicago women visited by a white agent of the US Sanitary Commission in 1863. Mary

86 Sojourner Truth, “THE VALIANT SOLDIERS. TUNE—‘John Brown.’ in Narrative of Sojourner Truth, a bondswoman of olden time... (Battle Creek, Mich., 1875), The Digital Schomburg, New York Public Library, http://digilib.nypl.org/dynaweb/digs/wwm97268 (accessed March 14, 2015). Susie King Taylor, Reminiscences of My Life in Camp with the 33D United States Colored Troops Late 1st S.C. Volunteers (Boston, 1902). Literary scholar Jennifer C. James leverages recent work in queer theory to discuss Taylor’s “self-fashioning” as a patriot—and a man. Taylor’s “flesh-based argument” asserted “black women’s right to be ‘public’ beings. ... By identifying herself with the duties, the postures, and the bodies of the men who surround[ed] her,” Taylor negated arguments that “relegated ‘proper’ women to the private domestic sphere,” and put them (bodily) into the “public/male domain of black ‘manhood rights.’” Taylor’s claims to citizenship and valor disrupted the linking of those qualities to male bodies, demonstrating, if not exactly an alternative discourse of patriotism, a possible willingness and desire to contest its gendered conventions. Further investigations of black women’s wartime correspondence or newspaper writing might reveal additional complications of the patriotism-manhood link. James, A Freedom Bought with Blood, 108.
Livermore described a “colored woman” whose husband had joined the 54th Massachusetts under Col. Robert Gould Shaw. “Not a cent has yet been paid by government to any colored soldier who has gone from Chicago,” Livermore’s notes from the visit indicate. The woman had been unable to work of late, as her child was sick with scarlet fever. Unable to pay the rent, the woman had been “put out on the sidewalk, in a cold rain storm” by a rich white landlord. One of her “colored neighbors, as poor as she,” took her in, but the baby died the following Sunday. She sought the help of Livermore in order to avoid burying her daughter in the municipal cemetery: “It don’t seem right for my child to be buried like a pauper … when her father is fighting for the country,” the woman said. Drawing a direct connection between her child’s death and the state’s failure to reward her husband’s military service, this woman demonstrated the kind of claim a poor northern African American woman made on the federal government. She indicted the state for contributing to her trauma by its unequal treatment of black soldiers. How her sentiments toward the nation were affected by this incident are unknown, but she must have felt pride when Livermore read aloud her husband’s account of the famed charge at Ft. Wagner, South Carolina.97

The woman’s distinction between nation and state is clear, however; the cost of the government’s failure to pay her husband could not be quantified. Livermore managed to secure a decent burial for the baby with funds offered by the state of Massachusetts to Chicago families of the 54th Volunteers and promised to help her find housing as soon as possible. Another African American woman Livermore visited was caring for four children while her husband served with the same regiment. Receiving none of her husband’s pay

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97 Mary A. Livermore, My Story of the War: A Woman’s Narrative of Four Years Personal Experience ... (Hartford, Conn.: A.D. Worthington and Co., 1890), 599-600. It is possible that the woman’s husband was refusing the half-pay offered to African American soldiers at the time.
from the government, she was herself unable to work due to typhoid fever. The Sanitary Commission was able to use the Massachusetts funds to secure her a doctor and nurse, medicine, and food for the children. Concluding her account in words more often associated with male combatants than with their wives, Livermore noted that any “full” history of the war should “chronicle the sublime valor manifested at the hearthstone, all over this land.”

African American women with more means pulled together funds from their limited resources to aid those emancipated people who had no money to establish new lives for themselves and their families. Boston women raised money with dramatic readings; New Yorkers held a ball. Philadelphia women focused on fundraising for freedpeople in the South and caregiving away from the front, quickly forming organizations to treat the wounded and support their families at home. Members of Philadelphia’s Mother Bethel AME Church organized a Contraband Committee to raise money, modeled on the work of Mary Todd Lincoln’s black dressmaker, Elizabeth Keckley, in Washington, DC. Harriet Jacobs, whose recently published *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl* (1861) had gained her notoriety throughout the North, secured donations and distributed needed clothing and supplies to escaped slaves in Washington, DC, and Alexandria’s Freedmen’s Village. Sojourner Truth held rallies in the Midwest in support of freedpeople and black enlisted men and their families. When Confederate sympathizers promised to burn down a hall hosting one of her speeches, Truth replied: “Then I will speak upon the ashes.” Dressed by supporters in a red, white, and blue shawl and matching sash and apron, Truth admitted

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88 While no precise date is given for Livermore’s visits, the reference to Fort Wagner places these events in the late summer or fall of 1863. Livermore, *My Story of the War*, 599-600. Livermore’s memoir notes various encounters with black people in the course of the war, including Sarah Morris, a fugitive slave on the Underground Railroad who made it to Chicago and was working tirelessly to secure her son’s return to her (362-364), and a kind African American nurse “of elephantine proportions, whose heart must have been as big as her body” (354).
that she was dressed to go into battle. Her friends joked that she should carry a sword or pistol, to which she replied, “I carry no weapon; the Lord will [preserve] me without weapons.”

Perhaps inspired by the Great Sanitary Fair held in June of 1863, twenty-two-year-old Sarah Cole and her sister, twenty-year old Isabella, of Philadelphia’s Seventh Ward helped form the Ladies’ Union Association (LUA), a group of about a dozen black women dedicated to raising funds for veterans of the US Colored Troops, their widows, and their orphaned children. Originally conceived as a temporary body to hold a one-time benefit event in September 1863, LUA members found a site for their “Fair in aid of Sick and Wounded Soldiers” only to have their reservation rescinded when the venue managers discovered the women were black. The Sansom Street Hall was finally secured for three days in the first week of January 1864. Sarah, probably with Isabella’s help, raised $10.55 at a table selling handmade baskets. Sixteen dollars was sent to Camp William Penn. By the end of the year, the Association had amassed nearly five hundred dollars for the Sanitary Commission, the Quakers’ Penn Relief Association, and various small orphanages and infirmaries throughout the country. Mrs. M. A. Maynos, in a letter of thanks sent from Norfolk, Virginia, wished the Philadelphia women could “see how enthusiastic [the wounded soldiers] become when I tell them how their friends at the north remember them. A great many of them are from the State of Pennsylvania.” The Cole sisters’ work helped to

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strengthen links among Pennsylvania’s African Americans that would extend well beyond the war years.\textsuperscript{90}

Sarah and Isabella’s group had noted from the start, however, that charity alone was not enough to address the ongoing needs of poor black people in Philadelphia. An effort to desegregate the streetcars of Philadelphia had stirred many black people to action around the time of the LUA fair. Working class black (and white) Philadelphians were utterly dependent on privately-owned mass transportation to travel to work, to do their daily errands, and, in the case of Sarah and Isabella Cole, to visit sick and wounded veterans and their families. LUA women were among those who “routinely ignored streetcar segregation orders,” in open defiance of local law and custom. In its first annual report, the Association expressed its hope “that our friends will make some efforts to gain us admission to the city cars, as we find great difficulty in reaching the Hospitals.” The requirements of their charitable work, framed as an expression of both Christian mercy and patriotic support, compelled them to participate in local nonviolent civil disobedience even as they aided the national war effort. Central to black families’ decisions to send their men to war was their understanding of what a victory would mean for them, already free from physical bondage but still daily burdened by the legal and social racism of American life. Even as Douglass delivered his admonitions to African American men to join up, Philadelphia abolitionist William Still and the Pennsylvania Anti-Slavery Society—the “friends” of whom Sarah and Isabella Cole spoke—were pressing the city’s eight private streetcar companies to

desegregate their cars. The repeated indignities of daily transportation had created a practical setting for the adjudication of social rights sought by black patriots.91

Just as their male relations learned to be soldiers in the US Army, black women in the North became militarized at home, learning to endorse state violence as a path to citizenship.92 While not literally carrying weapons or engaging in battle, mass mobilization required women to support men away at war economically, socially, and materially. “T.R.”, an African American soldier stationed near Beaufort, South Carolina, summarized men’s expectations of women and men at home. “All we want is that those at home should take care of our families, and speak cheerful words to us, do their duty as Christians, and we will do ours as soldiers.” Black women and men produced cheerful words and far more, including the clothing, rations, and even weaponry the US government failed to adequately provide. Wealthier women’s work as medical staff, supply-chain managers, social workers, fundraisers, and community organizers had them traveling throughout the city with a frequency and to distances propriety would never have allowed before the war. Black participation in the state’s authorized violence had effects on social structures that far outlasted the action on the field, however; as women and men reacted to events and shaped the course of the war, their relationships to one another and to the state changed significantly.93

92 Geographer Lorraine Dowler has offered a “feminist reformulation of militarization as a banal process that is furtively present in our everyday spaces,” both broader and more insidious than mere “mobilization” can describe. “Gender, Militarization and Sovereignty,” Geography Compass 6/8 (2012): 490-499. A. Kristen Foster notes historians’ general agreement that “black women understood the urgency of establishing the manhood of black men first, not because black women were helpless victims but because without “collective autonomy” there could be no “personal autonomy.” “We Are Men!”, 152.
93 Christian Recorder, September 10, 1864.
Judith Giesberg notes a disconcerting clash between pre-war sensibilities and wartime realities that black and white Americans encountered in the course of the war: “As they crossed wartime cities in their war relief work, ... women collided with antebellum understandings of race, class, and gender.” White Philadelphians “found black women’s movements to be disturbing because they reminded whites of what they had to lose with an extension of the space occupied by the free black community and the emergence of a new black assertiveness.” Even as the war opened new opportunities to black women, such as increased mobility and more prominent leadership roles, the intraracial politics of black enlistment were solidifying in the emerging black middle class a clear demarcation of national identity according to gender. Men’s legitimacy as Americans would be earned through violence; women’s would be confirmed through their support of that violence.94

Lizzie Hart of Morrowtown, eastern Ohio, grew increasingly frustrated with white northerners’ views of African Americans, which seemed even worse nearly two years after black soldiers joined the Union ranks en masse. “What must be done with the negro? is the daily topic of discussion in the North,” Hart observed. “Are they to come here and crowd our

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94 Giesberg, *Army at Home*, 118. Scholarship on women in wartime has dissected the inherently gendered nature of national identity, demonstrating that norms of womanhood are deeply influenced by war and the rhetoric of nationalism. Anne McClintock asserted “all nationalisms are gendered, all are invented, and all are dangerous.” Women serve “as biological reproducers of national groups ... as symbols and signifiers of national difference in male discourse ... as transmitters and producers of the cultural narratives themselves ... as reproducers of the boundaries of the nation (by accepting or refusing sexual intercourse or marriage with prescribed groups of men) ... as active participants in national movements: in armies, congresses, trade union activism, community organizations.” McClintock, “‘No Longer in a Future Heaven’: Women and Nationalism in South Africa,” *Transition* 51 (1991): 104. Amy Kaplan illustrated these dynamics in the antebellum US context in “Manifest Domesticity,” *American Literature* 70, no. 3 (1998): 581-606. Historian Ella Forbes argued “many women who assisted soldiers through relief organizations had a personal, rather than an abstract, motivation for their benevolence because they were succoring husbands, fathers, brothers, sons and other male relatives”; I argue that personal and abstract motivations are not mutually exclusive. In fact, personal investments in the outcome of the war made abstract commitments deeper and more lasting. The logical inverse of Forbes’ assumption is that there were Americans whose motivations for benevolence were abstract but not personal—a similarly unlikely circumstance. Forbes, *African American Women During the Civil War* (New York: Garland, 1998), 93.
States? We don’t want them among us. Cannot we purchase some distant territory, or banish them to some island? - any way to get rid of the negro.” Until the middle of the nineteenth century, colonization had been a serious proposal among white abolitionists; even President Lincoln clung to it as the best solution to “the negro problem” well into the war. Activists like Hart rejected it out of hand. No doubt voicing the thoughts of many readers of the Recorder, Hart complained, white people “admit that the colored man makes a good soldier, and that he is brave and energetic, and when called upon to defend his country and its flag, his bearing is that of a hero.” Yet, “the question still is asked.” If America could sustain four and a half million slaves, “can she not hold them when they become four and a half million of freemen? It is worse than folly for any one to suppose that our fathers, husbands, brothers, and sons, are fighting to restore a falling country, to be banished from it after peace is restored. They are fighting for their country, their race, and their rights.” Hart interpreted black enlistment as wholly patriotic and wholly progressive—a fight equally dedicated to country, race, and rights. It was not in spite of white Americans’ racism that black troops fought, she argued, but because of it: they “are fighting to restore a falling country,” one that held the promise of greatness not yet achieved.95

Hart’s combined commitment to her nation and frustration at persistent northern racism help to decode the ideological position of northern black women during the war. “When peace shall be restored - not such peace as we had before this contest commenced - but peace that will recognize men - not by their color - but by their integrity, then the

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95 Christian Recorder, October 1, 1864. Evidence of white Pennsylvanians’ fear and mistrust of southern black migrants is widespread. See numerous county petitions demanding the removal of African Americans from Pennsylvania in Records of General Assembly, House of Representatives, House File: 87th Session 1863, Box 18, Folder 5, Pennsylvania State Archives.
colored man will here find a home in America, and a grave in American soil.” When the “colored man” found a home, the women in his care would find it, too. In a curious turn of phrase, Hart concluded, “Just as long as there is an American flag, the colored race will be found by it.” Hart’s construction makes the flag the actor—the American nation is an idea so powerful that it can seek out the oppressed of its own accord and offer them freedom. The notion of a “freedom bought with blood,” to borrow Thomas Jefferson’s phrase, became the dominant interpretation of war violence for African American women and men during the Civil War.  

The cost of coupling freedom to state violence was a narrowing of the roles available to black women in the post-war nation. The opportunity for radical social change presented by the Civil War did not only transform black people’s relationship to the state, but their relations among themselves. Black leaders—male and female—responded to this opportunity by foregrounding masculinized violence shared with whites as the principal justification for equal citizenship. This embrace of “legitimate” state violence by black elites also strengthened class divisions among northern African Americans. Defining the “good” violence of war for abolition against the “bad” violence of poor people’s struggles to survive through petty theft of property and assault distanced respectable black people from less-reputable forms of violence committed by poor women and men. The emerging norms of

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black “respectability” and gender performance in the later-nineteenth century would thus be deeply influenced by the experience of mobilization.97

Enlistment in the US Army beginning in 1863 was a pivotal moment in the history of African American civil rights because this act defined, in part, how black people would conceive of America long after the war. The divide among black intellectuals over “accommodationism” or “separatism” in the twentieth century springs from the question raised by women and men in the midst of the Civil War: will cooperation with the white state on its own terms ever provide equal rights to black people? This question was already on the tongues of Philadelphians in the summer of 1863, when Frederick Douglass was compelled to address the “grumbling” there over enlistment. Debates over the terms of black enlistment are a microcosm of the questions that would frame the African American freedom struggle for the next century.98

Cooperation with the state in the Civil War was a matter of life and death for African Americans. The choice to enlist would shape their own lives, but also the future of black citizenship. Carole Emberton has argued that the embrace of masculinized war violence as a path to citizenship “entailed serious consequences” for proponents of black civil rights. White abolitionists and members of the emerging black middle class had to find ways to interpret both the killing and the dying inherent in war; black troops “did plenty of both,” but their killing recalled uncomfortable white fears of bloodthirsty slave uprisings while

97 The class dynamics of acceptable forms of violence are explored in more depth in Chapter 3.
their dying fit nicely into a biracial national narrative of sacrifice. White Americans’
ambivalence toward black men’s violence “complicated their understanding of black men’s
capacity for freedom,” Emberton observed. Black people’s understanding of their own
capacity for freedom was thus complicated, as well, when they internalized the link white
Americans had long drawn between killing for the state and belonging to the nation.99

Northern black women did not stand idly by as the question of enlistment touched
the lives of thousands of families in the North. While perhaps unaware at the time, women
were in a position to influence the future of their own freedom. When women like Frances
Watkins Harper and Sojourner Truth embraced militarization instead of civil protest as the
primary path to citizenship, they helped to pin rights to black participation in state violence
long into the future. The cost of that embrace occurred to Truth shortly after the war. While
happy the war had “partly destroyed” slavery, she could see that the rights of black women
remained in danger. “There is a great stir about colored men getting their rights,” Truth
said, “but not a word about the colored women; and if colored men get their rights, and not
colored women theirs, you see the colored men will be masters over the women, and it will
be just as bad as it was before…. I want women to have their rights.” Truth presciently
described the entrenchment of black patriarchy in the end of the nineteenth century, due in
no small part to the mobilization of black men in the Civil War. The cost of black equality in
white America was male dominance.100

100 Sojourner Truth, “Address to the First Annual Meeting of the American Equal Rights Association,”
in New York City, May 9, 1867, in The Concise History of Woman Suffrage: Selections from History of Woman
Suffrage, edited by Elizabeth Cady Stanton, Susan B. Anthony, Matilda Joslyn Gage, and The National American
Woman Suffrage Association, edited by Mari Jo Buhle and Paul Buhle (1978; repr., Urbana: University of
Women presented their skills and abilities, sacrificing men’s household contributions and companionship, for the promise of men’s full inclusion in the American state at the successful conclusion of the fight. Far from degrading African American patriotism, this transactional dynamic demonstrated the depth of women’s hope for basic fairness in the American system of law. Black enlistees and their families believed that their participation in the war created a binding contract for civil rights, over and above the existing moral debts of the white nation-state for its history of slavery. Although the equalization of pay, uniforms, and supplies was not encoded in federal law until February 1864, when northern black women and men joined the war they determined the terms of their own contract with the state. African Americans offered their service to the federal government on credit, with the expectation of equal rights upon victory over the Confederacy.¹⁰¹

¹⁰¹ In an 1857 West India Emancipation Day speech Frederick Douglass prophetically remarked: “Men may not get all they pay for in this world; but they must certainly pay for all they get.” Douglass, “If There Is No Struggle, There Is No Progress,” Two Speeches by Frederick Douglass… (Rochester, 1857).
Figure 2. Lincoln’s War Department explicitly addressed African Americans’ fears that capture by Confederate forces would lead to enslavement. “To Colored Men!”, Letters Received, 1863 – 1888, Records of the Adjutant General’s Office, 1780’s–1917, Record Group 94, National Archives.
**THE NEW VERSION**

**OF THE**

**Colored Volunteer.**

Composed and Dedicated to the 24th Regiment, U. S. C. T.

**BY CORPORAL SAM’L NICKLESS, CO. I.**

When the Twenty-fourth Regiment first began to form,
The boys kept at a distance, afraid to brave the storm,
But now they’re rushing in the ranks without any fear,
To join the noble Twenty-fourth, and be a Volunteer.

**CHORUS.**—Give us the flag, all free without one slave,
And we will defend it as our fathers did so brave,
Onward boys, onward. It’s the year of Jubilee,
God bless America, the land of Liberty.

It was said sometime ago, that the negro would not fight,
But when they gave us arms, and all a soldier’s right;
And sent us to the field, how we made the Rebels stare,
For they could not stand the charge of the Colored Volunteer.

**CHORUS.**—Give us the flag, &c.

When the Rebels made a dashing raid into our noble State,
We all became impatient, and for orders did not wait,
But went unto the Governor, and took him unawares,
For he did not know he’d find so many Colored Volunteers.

**CHORUS.**—Give us the flag, &c.

Now over twenty thousand men, we’ve sent into the field,
Who came from Pennsylvania, their country’s flag to shield;
They’re crowned themselves with laurels, their memory we revere,
The Nation now will always bless the Colored Volunteer.

**CHORUS.**—Give us the flag, &c.

Now we’ve raised another gallant band of brave and noble men,
For the present they are stationed at Camp William Penn;
Colonel Wagner is our leader, with him we’ll danger dare,
For his faith will ne’er be shaken in the Colored Volunteer.

**CHORUS.**—Give us the flag, &c.

Now to the twenty-fourth, my boys, three hearty cheers we’ll give,
And to her noble officers, long may their memory live;
They all have proved their courage, and will us onward cheer,
When Johnny Rebs dare to confront the Colored Volunteer.

**CHORUS.**—Give us the flag, &c.

Johnson, Printer, No. 7 North Tenth St.

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*Figure 3.* This song sheet produced in Philadelphia interprets black enlistment as an opportunity to hasten the “year of Jubilee,” reinforcing the connection between war violence and post-war rights. “The new version of the colored volunteer. By Corporal Sam’l Nickless, Co. I. Johnson, Printer, No. 7 North Tenth St.” [1863?] American Song Sheets, Library of Congress, Rare Books and Special Collections.
CHAPTER 3.

Poor, Black, and Free in Post-War Philadelphia: The Short Life of Mary Ash

In the spring of 1866, President Andrew Johnson marked one year of tenure as Abraham Lincoln's sudden successor and had already begun to fumble the political coalition that had won the war for the Union. Military hostilities had ended, but the fight over reconstruction was only beginning. “Radical” Republicans in the U.S. Congress envisioned broad inclusion of African Americans in the body politic, while moderates and former Confederates scrambled to hold on to as much power as they could. Black rights were the subject of much debate in Washington among the white men who controlled their dispensation, during what Heather Cox Richardson has termed “the Era of Citizenship.”

It was also that spring, about 200 miles down the Atlantic coast, near Norfolk, Virginia, that Eliza Ash gave birth to a baby girl. Having left North Carolina as a child, Eliza was most likely born enslaved and sold or transported to Virginia by an owner before the war. Eliza’s daughter was born free and given the name Mary. Though born just after the war, in a moment of great national hope for the future of African Americans, the events of Mary’s life suggest her freedom was bound by the chains of poverty that weighed on so many black people. Mary was an intelligent girl, short, with brown skin, brown hair, and striking grey eyes. She would die alone in a Philadelphia prison at the age of twelve.


103 Admission and Discharge Books, 1844-1888, RG 15.51, roll 393, Prison Population Records, Eastern State Penitentiary, Records of the Department of Justice, Pennsylvania State Archives. While there is no direct evidence linking Mary to the white Ash family of the Wilmington, North Carolina, area, it is possible Mary’s parents had been enslaved there by William Shepperd Ash, an antebellum Congressman and later major in the Confederate army. “Ash, William Shepperd,” Biographical Directory of the United States Congress, History, Art & Archives, U.S. House of Representatives, accessed August 24, 2015,
Mary was just one of the thousands of southern migrants that Philadelphia’s black benevolent women hoped to serve with food, shelter, education, and job opportunities. Their concern for the destitute was real—driven perhaps most powerfully by their rootedness in a Christian concern for the “least of these” among them. A broader concern animated the work of the “aspiring class” of African Americans, however: they knew that the physical appearance, economic performance, and proper moral character of each impoverished emancipated person moving North would affect their chances, as well.104

African Americans had to refute the long-standing prejudices of white supremacists for the black community as a whole to increase its strength. Black benevolent women focused their efforts on education and creating opportunities for self-improvement because these investments could bear the highest returns for “the race” in the long run. Indeed, black women’s commitment to their children’s schooling grew educational institutions throughout Philadelphia and the broader North that were second only to the church in their longevity and community impact. Begun in church basements or a storage room in a poor house as early as the 1820s, Philadelphia day and evening schools sustained by largely female staff served more than 2,300 black students in 1859, from a total black population of around 17,000. By the end of the nineteenth century local efforts like these would expand to include national organizing for racial uplift via the National Association of Colored Women’s Clubs.105

http://bioguide.congress.gov/scripts/biodisplay.pl?index=A000310. Wilmington had a significant free black population before the war, so it is also possible Mary’s family lived free in the city, performing domestic work, but her surname suggests some connection to the Ash family. Mary had acquired the ability to read and write by the time of her incarceration at the age of 10 in 1876.

If Mary Ash interacted with benevolent women before or during her short stay in Eastern State Penitentiary, the moment is likely lost to history. Much of what can be known about poor black women and girls in this era summarizes their lives in a brief statistic—19 “colored” female convicts, 1858—or a single ledger line—Martha Wright, “Mulatto,” 17, “Delicate” bodily health. An understanding of the purposes of benevolent women requires a clear picture of the people they served, and the conditions in which those women lived. While the illiterate or chronically ill may not have left extensive diaries describing their lives, this chapter attempts to construct a plausible picture of the subjects to whom wealthier black women offered their care.\(^\text{106}\)

Scholars’ attention to the high drama of the African American civil rights struggle has sometimes obscured the struggle for individual survival that many black Americans sustained throughout their lives. Black Americans’ fight to survive after the Civil War certainly involved struggles against white violence and resisting prejudiced social structures, but more fundamentally it required piecing together an economic life that could support life’s bare requirements. In 1860, just 10% of Philadelphia’s African American population owned 70% of that community’s wealth. The large black working class depended primarily on women’s work for sustenance, as women’s domestic work was in much greater demand than physical labor from black men, who competed with white men and recent European migrants. Many black artisans were “compelled to abandon their trades on account of the unrelenting prejudice against their color.” When the economic

depression of 1873 enveloped the country for the next six years, African Americans and recent migrants endured some of the harshest and longest financial consequences.\textsuperscript{107}

Even among the wealthiest ten percent of black households, financial stability was usually dependent on women earning income in addition to their husbands’ or fathers’, a circumstance that was unusual in wealthy white homes. Further, black people’s wealth did not translate to social autonomy as it did for many white families. Pennsylvania’s 1837 constitution had stripped free black property owners of their right to vote, even as it expanded the franchise to include all white men over the age of 21. Black women had never enjoyed suffrage in Pennsylvania.\textsuperscript{108}

As in the twentieth-century freedom struggle, it was a relatively small portion of the African American population that undertook electoral activism and explicit political protest; Philadelphia boasted the largest black population outside the South in 1870, but most of the activist leagues and benevolent associations born there in this era were launched by members of a few interconnected families. The vast majority of the city’s black citizens likely supported the political goals of the Equal Rights League, which advocated black male suffrage and jury service, and efforts to desegregate the streetcars, but could not

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attend meetings that took away from work opportunities and childcare duties. The poorest of Philadelphia’s African American women were linked in this way to the greater freedom movement; their “activism,” however, was their assertion that they had a right to survive.

Many black Philadelphia families had sent men to fight for the Union in the recent war—an experience that, while traumatic, shaped their national identity and linked them to their nation’s founding principle of human equality. Emancipated women and children making their way northward may have shared in that identity, but they faced challenges different than those experienced by wealthier African American benevolent women. Poor women had little access to the private education that prepared some black women for local teaching jobs or work in freedmen’s schools across the South. Southern post-emancipation poverty drew far more attention from northern black benevolent groups and white legislators than did the plight of black women and children in northern cities, despite the fact that many of them had only recently fled the South. While racism cut across class lines in important ways, the lives of Philadelphia’s women prisoners demonstrate that poor urban black women endured intersecting race, class, and sex oppressions that have been largely absent from existing studies of the Civil War era North.109

After the war, those African American women and men who had the means to participate in benevolent work threw themselves into improving the lives of children, embracing neighborhood private education even as they continued to struggle on the

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109 Class lines are especially difficult to draw for African American families in this period, as even “middle-class” or wealthy black families typically required income support from all family members, consolidated multiple households for financial reasons, or educated some children while others worked. My comparison does not suggest that wealthier families had easy lives, but that the scholarly focus on wealthier African American activists occludes the experience of the much larger segment of the population that did not have access to professional occupations or higher education. Admission and Discharge Books, 1844-1888, Eastern State Penitentiary, Pennsylvania State Archives. “Historical Census Browser,” University of Virginia, Geospatial and Statistical Data Center, 2004, http://mapserver.lib.virginia.edu/ (accessed February 1, 2016).
broader scale for an equitable portion of government funding. Those black women and girls who did not or could not help anyone but themselves may have shared the same political goals and desire for national belonging as their wealthier neighbors, but we cannot know. We need not read “politics” on to the suffering of a girl like Mary Ash for her story to have meaning; recognition of Mary’s life is enough. She died at twelve, but she also lived to twelve. Some poor African American women and girls like Mary are visible today only through the records kept by officers at the Eastern State Penitentiary and census workers in the 1870s. The following chapter pieces together the information that remains in order to look behind the civil rights struggle in post-war Philadelphia, at the struggle simply to survive.\footnote{In an effort to describe a “typical” poor, black child’s experience in post-Civil War Philadelphia I have speculated below about Mary Ash’s motivations, perspectives, and experiences. I do not intend to make claims about Ash as a specific historical actor, but to suggest the limited possibilities that were available to most poor or orphaned black children in this era. It is my hope that this effort will inspire further curiosity and investigation into the lives of those African Americans who were not well-known activists, but who were nevertheless an important piece of African American history.}

Economic pressure led many poor Philadelphians into criminalized activities; able-bodied African Americans who could find a job were eager to work legally. Most attended church, some attended school, and a small minority turned to crime to survive. Then, as now, no Pennsylvanian imprisoned for a crime could vote in civil elections. Poor black women and men who resorted to theft for survival were punished with the loss of their already limited freedoms. Between 1871 and 1879, 144 African American Philadelphians served sentences in Pennsylvania’s Eastern State Penitentiary at 22nd and Fairmount Streets. While black people generally received sentences comparable to those of whites for the same crimes, blacks were overrepresented in the prison population. Just 3% of Philadelphians were African American in 1870, but they represented about 12% of the
inmate population of Eastern State. African American women represented a tiny fraction of inmates; fewer crimes were committed by women generally, and women were more likely to be found innocent by juries. Women received more lenient sentences than men, possibly due to the widespread cultural belief that women’s presence at home among children was more important than men’s, or that women were less prone to criminality than men.\footnote{Admission and Discharge Books, 1844-1888, Eastern State Penitentiary, Pennsylvania State Archives. Statistics of the Population of the United States ... from the Original Returns of the Ninth Census (Washington, DC: Government Printing Office, 1872), 58. Howard Bodenhorn, “Criminal Sentencing in 19th-century Pennsylvania,” Explorations in Economic History 46 (2009): 294.}

Intake and statistical reports from the Eastern State Penitentiary offer a glimpse at African American women whose lives went unnoted in the records of church life, private schools, or family scrapbooks. An examination of the actions that landed these women in prison suggests that poverty abetted by prejudice led to untenable life circumstances. The effort to reconstruct some of the life experiences of poor, often illiterate, black women in Philadelphia in the 1870s is necessarily speculative. Surviving census records and official documents are poor sources of information on itinerant families whose residences, employment, and institutional affiliations were often brief and inconsistent. Church, political, and news sources speak of a broad African American community experience resisting prejudice and building supportive institutions; indeed, the poor and imprisoned were the very people that black benevolent women aimed to support. Wealthier black families balanced a complicated set of priorities including care for themselves, care for their churches, and care for the future of “the race.” Yet the black community, much like the white majority in Philadelphia, was built of economic strata that created distinctions between leaders and followers, donors and beneficiaries, the influential and the
overlooked. Poor black women in the North faced innumerable challenges as they struggled to meet the demands of day-to-day life in a rapidly changing city. An estimation of the life of Mary Ash may reveal what that struggle looked like for some of Philadelphia’s most vulnerable.

* * *

Work began for most African American women at an early age. Girls as young as six and seven assisted their mothers and aunts at needle work or laundering, gaining the skills they would need to survive as adults in the urban North. Girls who assisted dressmakers like Sarah and Isabella Cole gained a marketable skill in an era when both white and black clienteles had difficulty finding affordable manufactured clothes. Women who were able to sustain their families with piece work or laundry in their own home may have appreciated a relative autonomy and independence not shared by their counterparts living in the homes of white families. Nancy Prince, a black woman working in Massachusetts for a white family of seven in the early nineteenth century described similar work as “very severe, especially the washings.” On Sunday nights Prince prepared for the wash. She would “soap the clothes and put them into the steamer, set the kettle of water to boiling, and then close in the steam, and let the pipe from the boiler into the steam box that held the clothes.” Prince was woken at two o’clock on Monday mornings to continue the work and wait on the family, who said she was “too slow.” Prince “was not spoken kind to, at that.”

“The humble pose” was required of African American workers who had to “present a self-effacing posture or pay deference to whites publicly while privately maintaining their self-respect.” This “mask” hid their “personal convictions,” protecting them from a loss of business from whites who may have found self-confidence in black workers off-putting or threatening. White patronage was vital to poor black families’ economic survival. But the constant need for “steeling the psychic, facial expressions, and body language” likely put tremendous stress on the minds and bodies of African Americans who were not free to express themselves fully in their daily work. Constantly feigning ignorance or remaining silent in response to insults and degradation could take a heavy toll. Wealthier black northerners could send their children to private school; in Philadelphia, any black family who could afford to remove their children from the segregated public schools did so. Sixteen-year-old Maritcha Lyons of Providence, Rhode Island, could point to her stellar academic record for those white people who she said “put ‘on airs.’” Poor workers on the edge of survival could not enjoy that psychological boost.113

In the 1860s some 80% of black women workers in Philadelphia were domestic servants. African-American Republican activist Isaiah C. Wear remarked in 1873 that when he looked “at the industrial opportunities open to all others, I find them closed against us.


The foundry, the factory, the workshops of every kind, are closed against us, whether they are public or private. Our whole female population form no part of the many thousands of workmen that crowd our thoroughfares at the close of every day’s labor.” Though a more highly-educated black woman like Philadelphia’s Rebecca J. Cole might work as a surgeon, or a teacher (especially after the Civil War), most had little opportunity other than domestic labor. In a study of non-white workers in Civil War-era Philadelphia, Theodore Hershberg found that formerly enslaved black residents owned more property and were notably better off than free-born blacks—though both suffered severely limited access to work opportunities. Households headed by emancipated people were slightly more likely to be headed by two parents, and were 20% wealthier in real and personal property than free-born headed households. While just one in thirteen free-born households owned property, one in eight ex-slave headed households did; among male former slaves who had purchased their own freedom, one in three owned property. 114

Hershberg is careful to note that these data do not suggest a “benign” impact of slavery, but that “the antebellum Northern city was destructive” to African Americans’ economic and social conditions, as well. It should not be assumed that slavery “represented in all instances the historical root” of blacks’ problems. Some “may more accurately be traced to the processes of urbanization, industrialization, and immigration, occurring in a setting of racial inequality rather than slavery.” Many women and men endured these conditions and still managed to improve the lot of their children and grandchildren in the

last decades of the nineteenth century, despite the ongoing threat of violence and unfair
treatment. But other African Americans in Philadelphia found themselves on the wrong
side of the law, turning to prostitution, theft, or fraud to survive in the segregated city.
While some black women may have turned to crime due to psychological disposition,
choice, or desperation, all who were caught and convicted faced a wholly different kind of
suffering in the Eastern State Penitentiary.\textsuperscript{115}

Women were a tiny minority of incarcerated Americans in the mid-nineteenth
century. Their existence was thus a fascinating peculiarity, as evidenced by a fanciful story
in \textit{Harper’s} in late 1863. “The first sentiment that gains expression when a female convict
finds herself in the reception-room of the penitentiary, is that of regard for her personal
appearance. It happens thus: - By the rules of the prison, the hair of the inmates is cut to the
regulation length, and this operation calls forth from the unfortunate woman curses and
prayers, tears and wheedling entreaties, sometimes even the fiercest resistance. She may
have plotted murder, may have poisoned her own child, or committed any other crime
without the quiver of an eyelid; but she cannot submit to the indignity of having her locks
reduced by the shears of the penitentiary.” Other, “often amusing instances of vanity”
ocurred regularly in the lives of women prisoners, according to \textit{Harper’s}. A female guard
impacted that “one of the most serious duties of her class [is] to check the love of display
which shows itself even here.”\textsuperscript{116}

\textsuperscript{115} Hershberg, “Free Blacks in Antebellum Philadelphia,” 125, 127.
That the piece was reprinted in the \textit{Recorder} without editorial comment suggests it was read for humor by a
largely black readership, just as it had been by the largely white audience of \textit{Harper’s}. 

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This silly sketch of women inmates was probably very entertaining to Harper’s national readership; it threw a light gloss on a frightening experience that was remote and mysterious to the middle-class American reading public. The specter of a stylish woman entering the dark and low setting of a prison juxtaposed two familiar literary scenes: the sunless Victorian dungeon of Dickens and Dumas combined with the plush appointments of the mannered class in Flaubert’s Madame Bovary or the many serialized social dramas of the day. Such “amusing instances” were the least of the “indignities” suffered by real women, however. Adjustment to life in a nearly all-male environment beyond the reach of most conventions of propriety was probably the most terrifying experience of many women’s lives.

When Rhoda Buck, a.k.a. Juliet Russell, was convicted of conspiracy in April 1871 she had spent ten weeks in a Bucks County jail before she was admitted to the Eastern State Penitentiary. The 31-year-old laundress was recorded at intake as a “mulatto” female in “delicate” health with a noticeable scar on her left arm, possibly from a smallpox vaccination. Minor social indignities may have escaped Buck’s notice upon entering the prison, described as “cold and cheerless” and full of “foul draughts of air” by later reformers. No details of her crime remain, but a conspiracy charge could be levied for anything from larceny to physical assault. Buck pled not guilty to the charge of conspiracy at her arraignment on the last Friday in April, and a Bucks County jury of white males found her guilty by the next day. On Monday, she was sentenced to one year and eleven
months of "separate or solitary confinement at labor"—in addition to a fine of one dollar for the cost of her prosecution.117

At the time of her conviction Buck had at least two children—Francis, aged five, and Samuel, aged two. Though nearly 80% of black Philadelphia households had two parents present between 1847 and 1897, Buck’s home in rural Bristol, Pennsylvania, included only herself and her children in 1870. The whereabouts and condition of Francis and Samuel at the time of Buck’s arrest and conviction are unknown, though African American orphans in the area often found their way to the Association for the Care of Colored Orphans, a home begun by Philadelphia Quaker women in 1822. Association records are filled with parents like Buck who were living, but surrendered their children when they were unable to provide for them due to poverty or imprisonment.118

Various charitable institutions existed for the care of destitute children in Philadelphia, some decades old by the post-war period.119 The House of Refuge at Poplar

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117 Admission and Discharge Books, 1844-1888, Eastern State Penitentiary, Pennsylvania State Archives. Records make a clear distinction between larceny (theft of property unguarded), burglary (illegal entry into a building to steal), robbery (theft directly from a person or protected place), and the “attempted” commission of each. Pennsylvania Prison Society, *The Journal of Prison Discipline and Philanthropy* 40 (January 1901): 9. For the historical sociology of imprisoning women in the nineteenth-century U.S., see Estelle B. Freedman, “Their Sisters’ Keepers: An Historical Perspective on Female Correctional Institutions in the United States: 1870-1900,” *Feminist Studies* 2, No. 1 (1974): 77-95. Courts in the nineteenth century had much broader discretion in sentencing than courts today. A 2005 Pennsylvania statute holds that a first-time conviction for rape garners 46 to 66 months in prison for the perpetrator, while the same conviction in the era of the Civil War earned between 120 and 252 months—though even this broad range was not strictly binding. Bodenhorn attributes this drastic change to the fact that nineteenth-century courts were directed by juries concerned with local behavioral standards, rather than lawyers and judges concerned with legal theory. “Criminal Sentencing in 19th-century Pennsylvania,” 287, 294. W.E.B. Du Bois, “who despaired of the living conditions of African Americans in late-19th-century Philadelphia, would not attribute black crime to black poverty. About 10% of Philadelphia’s blacks were paupers, yet he attributed only about 10% of black incarcerations to poverty per se. Du Bois attributed excess black criminality to poor education, rural immigrants unprepared for urban life, the “‘temptations of the city,’ and diverse other social causes. Poverty played only a small role” (296).


119 Pennsylvania’s wartime governor Andrew Gregg Curtin was instrumental in generating financial and political resources for the expansion and improvement of Soldiers’ Orphans Homes. On the politics of orphanage development and child labor, see Judith Giesberg, “Orphans and Indians: Pennsylvania’s Soldiers’
and William Streets was partially funded by the state and housed children as well as offering free elementary education. Boys were put to work “at some useful trade,” while girls worked at “making garments, mending, washing and other domestic duties.” An Orphans’ Shelter on Thirteenth Street was coordinated by women Friends for the exclusive care of black children, and the Home for Colored Children on Girard Avenue was designed “to take the entire control of destitute colored children of both sexes, instruct them mentally and morally, and place them as apprentices in some useful occupation with persons interested in their welfare.” While such places could refuse the care of children deemed dangerous or incorrigible, they could be a safety net for African American families who could not care for their children at home. The establishment of such institutions reflected a growing societal concern for the welfare and proper upbringing of American children.\textsuperscript{120}

In the decades after the Civil War, municipal and state governments began a relatively sudden shift in their treatment of children. Industrialization and rapidly increasing urban populations meant that ever-larger numbers of young children were at work, not just on family farms, but in mining, heavy manufacturing, and factory work. In the 1870s “fears about disordered families stirred an intense national debate about the fate of children.” Middle-class Americans began to view the state as a legitimate protector and governor of children whose parents could not or would not do the job. “Concern about abuse, delinquency, and neglect led to demands for greater state intervention” and “a

growing faith in law as a tool for changing children’s lives.” This concern for child welfare grew simultaneously with concern for the tax-burden borne by the growing urban middle class, however. Poor relief was viewed by many as a drag on local taxpayers. A class-based distinction emerged in the enforcement of the law concerning children: wealthier, white children were protected by the “common-law rights of parents and freedom from state interference,” while laws applied to poor and non-white children used “dependency to abridge individual rights” and to justify public cost-saving measures in child apprenticeship rules. While Pennsylvania law did not eliminate the educational requirement for apprenticeships that many other states had jettisoned by the 1870s, black children were especially vulnerable to the system of involuntary servitude. Historian Michael Grossberg summarizes the apprenticeship system of the post-war period as an “American system of apartheid for black children” indicative of “how race as well as class restrictions were being embedded in the laws governing American children.”

Children were surrendered by family members or other benevolent associations for a number of reasons, often due to the death or extended illness of a parent, but sometimes due only to a parent’s lack of money. New arrivals at the Association for the Care of Colored Orphans outside Philadelphia were often three to five years old, though older children sometimes appeared. The war complicated the already challenging conditions of poverty; a number of ten to twelve-year-old “contrabands” were housed temporarily by the Association in August 1864 before being placed in apprenticeships on local farms. A nephew of Emilie Davis was taken to the Association by an uncle when his mother died and

his father was serving in the U.S. Navy in the summer of 1863. Francis, aged seven, was surrendered with his uncle’s understanding that the boy would be “provided for, instructed and bound out ... for such a term of years, within lawful age, as may appear to be proper.” In the best cases, children might learn a useful trade that could keep them economically self-sufficient when they entered adulthood. This approach to survival was far from ideal, however: many free African American children were bound to Pennsylvania farmers in conditions not all together distinct from enslavement.\textsuperscript{122}

Rachel Cooper was a few months’ shy of her eighth birthday when the Association for the Care of Colored Orphans arranged her indenture to William H. Scheetz of Montgomery County in April 1856 for “the full term of ten years, four[?] months, and eight days.” Called an “apprentice” in her indenture document, the seven-year-old, semi-literate girl apparently agreed to faithfully obey her “master” and any of his “lawful commands.” Rachel could not sell her own possessions without Scheetz’s permission, nor “frequent taverns, play at unlawful games, nor contract matrimony” while he instructed her “in the art and mystery of housewifery.” Scheetz agreed to teach Rachel to read and write, and to provide “an half quarter of whole days schooling” each year. The farmer further agreed to provide Rachel one new suit of clothes and a Bible upon completion of her term, as had long been the custom for both indentured servants and enslaved Americans. Unfortunately, Rachel died at sixteen, before her indenture would have concluded, never receiving the clothes or the Bible.\textsuperscript{123}


\textsuperscript{123} Calculated from dates provided in her indenture document, Rachel Cooper was born around August 1848. She died sometime in late 1864 or 1865. No cause was recorded. Association for the Care of Colored Orphans, Records, Friends Historical Library.
A 1770 statute allowed Pennsylvania masters to remand their apprentices to prison for disobedience, and an 1847 inspection report of Philadelphia County prisons indicated the law was still in effect at that time. Inspectors noted “the distressing, humiliating and crushing effect which imprisonment has upon the tender mind of extreme youth, from the age of twelve to eighteen years.” Further, the “many instances of cruel and heartless abandonment of the apprentice by his master after imprisonment have long since awakened the attention of the board.”

Whatever the conditions of indentured servitude, there is no indication that life outside the orphanage would have been an improvement. One black boy, “probably two years old or upward,” was found by a white woman, Hannah Richardson, in March 1865 on the turnpike near Wilmington, Delaware. Supposing him purposely abandoned, Richardson took him home. When no one inquired about the boy, she brought him to the orphanage. He was given the name “Robinson Hill,” after the place on the turnpike where he was found. Perhaps life in a home for orphaned children was a mercy compared to the experience of children who stayed with their parents but lived without the basic necessities of life. This may have been the lot of Mary Ash.

Born in 1866 outside Norfolk, Virginia, Mary and her mother Eliza moved inland by 1870 to Danville, Virginia, on the North Carolina border. Eliza worked at “keeping house” and Mary attended school at least part of the time, probably in Danville’s new Freedmen’s School. After the war, Philadelphia Quakers established a headquarters of the Friends’

125 Association for the Care of Colored Orphans, Records, Friends Historical Library. Another child, Virginia Wiggins, gained a place in the shelter at the age of three and a half, only to be sent out at the age of ten for being “an incorrigible & rebellious child.”
Freedmen’s Association in Danville, choosing the location because it had an office of the Freedmen’s Bureau and was protected by a Northern military garrison. This link to Philadelphia Quakers may explain how or why Mary relocated to Pennsylvania between 1870 and 1876. Just five years old in 1870, it is unlikely that Mary made it North without assistance, either from her mother or from Danville’s new relief workers. At some point before the age of ten Mary had acquired work as a “house maid” in Philadelphia, and in September 1876, Mary E. Ash was sentenced to four years in the state penitentiary for the crime of arson. Entry records describe her as a “mulatto female,” age eleven, who had received a small pox vaccine, and was a “moderate” drinker. It was Mary’s first and only criminal conviction.126

In the 1870s, about 8% of Eastern State Penitentiary prisoners from Philadelphia, both black and white, were younger than 18 upon intake. Remaining records from the Eastern State Penitentiary do not include a description of the circumstances of Mary’s charge for arson; very few inmates there were incarcerated for the crime in the 1870s—less than 1% of all Philadelphia imprisonments. Combined with the rarity of women of color in this penitentiary, the incidence of black girls imprisoned for arson in Philadelphia must have been quite small indeed. The events leading to Mary’s imprisonment are unknown, but several young black girls were accused of arson in the Philadelphia press in this era. Their stories offer possible explanations for Mary Ash’s imprisonment.127

127 Martha Wright, a seventeen-year-old “mulatto” woman, was imprisoned for arson in 1873. Admission and Discharge Books, 1844-1888, Eastern State Penitentiary, Pennsylvania State Archives. At least five instances of white girls charged with arson appear in Philadelphia-area newspapers between 1860 and
In May 1863 Philadelphia newspapers reported that “a colored girl, about ten years of age” set fire to a basket of wood chips and left them next to the coal bin in the boarding house where she worked as a domestic servant for a Mrs. Brown. Apparently, this was only the latest of several attempts made by the girl to burn the building down. The Fire Marshal intended to place the girl in the “insane department of the alms house, as she is evidently demented.”

Two years later, in May 1865, a “colored girl,” Cornelia Lewis was charged with arson and sent to prison to “await an examination,” presumably of her sanity. Cornelia’s employer, Thomas Marshall, was reportedly awoken by two fires burning in his family’s home at about five o’clock in the morning. Cornelia was not initially suspected, Marshall told the authorities, but when the young woman told Marshall’s wife that she had to leave right away to visit her sick mother, the family grew suspicious and turned Lewis over to the Fire Marshall. When questioned by authorities, Cornelia denied telling Mrs. Marshall that her mother was sick, but said “she left the house because Mrs. Marshall scolded her.”

In both instances, a young black girl was at the mercy of white adult employers and authorities. The informal process of accusation and arrest of children left their initial defenses not in the hands of a trained public defender, but in their own. There is no indication that the girls’ parents were involved in the early stages of their detentions; if the children were indentured workers, their employer functioned as both their accuser and their guardian. Those children whose parents were still living may have worked far from

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128 *Public Ledger*, May 29, 1863.

129 *Daily Age*, May 17, 1865.
their families; their mothers or fathers could have been employed on distant farms or in
domestic work somewhere else in the city. Either or both girls might have been mentally ill.
Perhaps Mary Ash was simply a victim of circumstance, or psychosis, with no one around to
defend her.

Some girls took great risks to change their circumstances, but when unsuccessful,
quickly admitted to their crimes. Anna Maria Merritt waited until her Juniper Street
employer had left the house for church one Sunday morning before taking $60 from a desk.
She set fire to the desk to hide the theft, but became frightened and put the fire out. At first
Anna Maria blamed “a colored woman” who had broken into the house, but later made a
full confession. Emma Walters, 12, also took advantage of her employers’ church
attendance and used the opportunity to light a barrel of shavings on fire in the cellar. The
fire was discovered quickly and Emma acknowledged her guilt before being sent to the
“House of Refuge.”

Anna Maria’s initial insistence that a mysterious stranger had stolen the money and
set a fire to conceal the crime did not convince the adults around her of her innocence, but
the fact that she selected a “colored woman” as her fictional villain is noteworthy; she may
have thought her employers would find that description an especially compelling one.
While Anna Maria may have returned to work, Emma lost her job and her living
accommodations. Confession was not a guarantee of forgiveness by the law, even for a
child. If the fire Mary Ash was connected to was small and quickly extinguished, or the
authorities had directed her to a poor house rather than the penitentiary, her life might

130 Daily Age, August 29, 1865; Public Ledger, August 29, 1865.
have continued on a different trajectory. Perhaps her “moderate” drinking got her into some trouble from which she could not get out.

In August 1877 at the home of Mr. George W. Eddy, 1734 N. 13th St., a fire was discovered in the basement but it was quickly put out. Policemen discovered, “secreted among a lot of kindling wood,” a coal oil lamp which appeared to have been placed there purposely to cause a fire. A ten-year-old African American girl, Emma Gaines, had been employed by the Eddy family as a domestic servant for about two months. “On being closely questioned,” Emma admitted that she wished she could “go home to her parents,” and placed the lamp in the cellar in hopes that it would burn the house down and end her employment. The girl was taken to the central police station for a hearing before the alderman—apparently without any kind of assistance for her defense. During the hearing Emma “cried piteously,” winning “considerable sympathy from the spectators present.” Sympathy did not spare her from imprisonment for arson, however. Philadelphia’s House of Refuge sometimes refused to accept children accused of arson, and there was no juvenile reformatory in the city at the time. City officials sent Emma to Eastern State Penitentiary, or possibly the Philadelphia County Prison (called Moyamensing), until her case came up at the next term of the court.131

Mary Ash, like Emma Gaines, may have felt she had no way out of an impossible situation. It is unclear if Eliza Ash was still living in 1876; Mary’s live-in employment does not preclude her mother’s residence nearby. Perhaps Mary waited until her employer left

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131 *The Philadelphia Inquirer*, August 9, 1877. Regarding the lack of options beyond prison for juvenile offenders, see “City Intelligence,” *The Philadelphia Inquirer*, August 10, 1865. Moyamensing Prison had a separate facility for women by 1901, possibly as early as the 1860s, when the space ceased to be used for holding debtors. *Journal of Prison Discipline and Philanthropy*, 10-11.
the house for church one Sunday and took that opportunity—one of only a few each week when she was truly alone and unwatched—to attempt to change the daily experience of her life. One can imagine a small girl choosing from the tools that were available to her to express her frustrations or fears. Kitchen tools, brooms, laundry soap, or wood chips near the stove were the things she had access to and that she could control. Physical and sexual abuse of indentured children was not unusual, although the record is silent about whether such acts were among Mary’s motivations to act. Perhaps young girls set fires when they felt they had no other way out of the life choices that had been made for them. Perhaps, like Emma Gaines, they simply missed their families.

Whatever her motivation—or actual guilt—Mary Ash was arrested for arson, tried, and sentenced to four years in the penitentiary. The eleven-year-old, 4’4” girl entered the prison at the corner of 22nd and Fairmount on September 18, 1876, just as the city’s Centennial World’s Fair was winding down a few miles away in Fairmount Park. The vanity portrayed in Harper’s Weekly was likely far from her mind. The prison may not have stocked clothes that would fit her small frame or her eight-and-a-half inch feet.\(^{132}\)

Located in a densely-populated residential area, the Eastern State Penitentiary was separated from surrounding life by only a tall stone wall. Later inmates reported that children’s voices from a local elementary school could easily be heard inside the prison. Mary could have overheard children her own age at play. Following the “Pennsylvania System of Separate Confinement,” administrators attempted to keep inmates entirely segregated from each other. A radial architectural design, including multiple cell blocks and

\(^{132}\) Admission and Discharge Books, 1844-1888, Eastern State Penitentiary, Pennsylvania State Archives. Even adult African American women incarcerated at Eastern State Penitentiary in the 1870s were typically no taller than five feet.
separate outdoor exercise areas, was inspired by the research of the Philadelphia Society for Alleviating the Miseries of Public Prisons. If Mary was indeed separated from most human contact, her miseries must have been difficult to alleviate.\textsuperscript{133}

Some prisoners served apprenticeships beyond the prison walls, though in very small numbers—just 7\% of all imprisonments recorded for the county.\textsuperscript{134} No Philadelphia women appear to have been assigned work outside the prison between 1871 and 1879. Women prisoners performed cleaning and sewing tasks inside the prison, saving the state the costs of outside labor. A study of juvenile reformatories in the nineteenth century found that inmates were typically assigned tasks according to sex and race stereotypes. Skilled work for white males, unskilled labor for black males, and domestic work for white and black females was a conventional division of tasks. Though theoretically committed to solitary confinement, prison administrators throughout Pennsylvania found that their facilities simply could not keep up with the number of inmates assigned to them, so some cohabitation of cells certainly occurred by the 1870s.\textsuperscript{135}


\textsuperscript{134} Records are unclear as to whether these apprenticeships occurred before or during incarceration. While convict labor often undercut the price of free labor in this period, particularly in the rural South, Eastern State Penitentiary records do not suggest this practice in Philadelphia. Perhaps the labor pool there was simply too large with recent migrants willing to work for low wages to make prison labor a worthwhile option for administrators. Admission and Discharge Books, 1844-1888, Eastern State Penitentiary, Pennsylvania State Archives.

Sharing a cell with a woman might have brought some companionship to Mary Ash, but it might also have been the cause of her death due to illness just sixteen months after her arrival. Spread by bacteria in a cough or sneeze, pulmonary tuberculosis, or phthisis, as it was termed at the time, would have been very hard on a girl of Mary’s age and weight. Chest pain, fatigue, and a cough lasting for weeks were common symptoms. A medical text published in 1875 described the growth of cavities in the lungs filled with liquid which could cause a patient to literally drown in her own bed. Fever and weight loss must have devastated Mary’s body quickly; she died on January 16, 1878, at the age of twelve. Mary was buried without a marker in the “City Ground.”

Despite the best intentions of prison reformers, solitary confinement did not protect Mary Ash from the disease that killed her. African American women fared somewhat better than girls: just two of seven black women aged 17 to 31 died between 1871 and 1879, and in both cases the cause went unrecorded. Rachel J. Hall was imprisoned for larceny in 1878 and, despite phthisis in her family history, left prison with “improved health.” Individual constitution was a factor in women’s health, but so was prison life itself. Eastern State Penitentiary administrators were “surprisingly relaxed and shockingly brutal,” according to one prison historian. While some prisoners were “allowed to keep pets in their exercise yards and could decorate their cells,” punishments for rule-breaking included “straitjackets and the shower bath, whereby prisoners were chained to a wall or strapped to a chair and deluged with gallons of chilled water.” The widely-publicized death in 1833 of inmate

Mathias Maccumsey at the hands of Eastern State guards prompted an investigation of prison practices that uncovered “mismanagement, embezzlement, and perverse sexual encounters between inmates and staff.” The small number of women housed in the penitentiary at any given time were subject to the absolute control of just a few guards.137

Rhoda Buck was released a few weeks earlier than expected on March 1, 1873, perhaps for good behavior, or perhaps because the “infant 3 wks. old” with whom she was discharged had become a problem. No official explanation of her pregnancy was provided in prison records, though the external investigation’s finding of sexual contact between inmates and staff suggests that rape could have been the cause. Apparently, Buck’s pregnancy did not generate enough concern among administrators to relocate her before her child’s birth, or perhaps Buck concealed her condition. Buck’s early release could indicate a desire on the part of prison officials to show leniency to a nursing mother. It could also have been a recognition that while a pregnancy might be hidden in the Pennsylvania System of incarceration, a screaming infant was not so easy to conceal. Sarah J. Bowser served less than a year of a five-year sentence for assault and battery before she was discharged in 1874. The typically succinct notes of the prison clerk indicate only that Bowser “gave birth to a child.”138

A statistical comparison of inmates convicted in Philadelphia in the 1870s reveals discrepancies according to sex and color. Philadelphia County records indicate that African Americans were convicted and incarcerated at a younger age than whites. In the 1870s, the

average age of white male Philadelphia inmates increased by two years (from 25 to 27.6), while in the same period the average age of black male inmates decreased by two years (28.6 to 26.4). The age difference according to color was much more pronounced among women inmates. Black women incarcerated at Eastern State Penitentiary in the 1870s were 21.3 years old on average, while white women were 34.5 years old. These discrepancies certainly have multiple causes, but limited access to schools and gainful employment may have driven down the average age of black inmates.\textsuperscript{139}

The lack of educational opportunities open to black Philadelphians were reflected in the institution’s intake statistics, for convicted white Philadelphians were 28\% more likely to have attended school than black inmates (see Figure 1). Among those white and black prisoners with some formal education, whites on average had spent an additional year in school. White female inmates were 42\% more likely to have attended school than black women. The rate of education among inmates rose through the 1870s: while about half had some schooling in 1871, 88\% had been to school as of 1879. Urban northerners had better access to public education generally in this period, though poorly equipped, segregated public schools led those black families who could afford private education to send their children to schools run by black teachers and administrators. The privately funded Institute for Colored Youth was home to the children of community leaders like the Fortens, the Purvises, and the Coles. Private education by African American instructors was out of reach for black Philadelphians who turned to crime for survival: fully 99\% of black

\textsuperscript{139} Ibid.
inmates at Eastern State Penitentiary who attended school were educated in segregated public schools.\textsuperscript{140}

\textit{Table 1.} Formal education of Philadelphia Co. inmates, Eastern State Penitentiary, 1871-1879.

\begin{tabular}{|c|c|c|c|c|c|c|}
\hline
 & \textbf{“Colored”} & & & \textbf{White} & & \\
\hline
\textbf{Year} & \textbf{Inmates} & With formal schooling & Age on leaving school & \textbf{Inmates} & With formal schooling & Age on leaving school \\
\hline
1871 & 7 & 14\% & 13.0 & 72 & 53\% & 14.2 \\
1872 & 9 & 0\% & - & 68 & 69\% & 15.1 \\
1873 & 12 & 67\% & 14.8 & 90 & 76\% & 15.0 \\
1874 & 11 & 45\% & 15.8 & 90 & 87\% & 14.4 \\
1875 & 14 & 71\% & 13.9 & 103 & 75\% & 14.3 \\
1876 & 22 & 50\% & 14.3 & 190 & 88\% & 14.4 \\
1877 & 25 & 76\% & 14.2 & 150 & 83\% & 13.7 \\
1878 & 17 & 65\% & 13.5 & 162 & 86\% & 14.3 \\
1879 & 27 & 70\% & 13.4 & 186 & 91\% & 14.2 \\
\hline
\textbf{Total} & \textbf{144} & \textbf{51\%} & \textbf{12.5} & \textbf{1111} & \textbf{79\%} & \textbf{14.4} \\
\hline
\end{tabular}

*Presumes average age at entry to be 6 years old.*

In addition to educational history, the state recorded other factors it considered important to understanding criminality in Philadelphia’s population. Inmates’ number of prior convictions, marital status, literacy, temperance, and whether parents were alive or dead were all tracked by prison clerks. Crimes were recorded and categorized as “property” or “personal,” a classification that generally distinguished between nonviolent and violent crimes. Eastern State Penitentiary statistics suggest that African Americans were less likely to commit violent crimes than whites in Philadelphia in the 1870s.\textsuperscript{141}


\textsuperscript{141} In determining the nonviolent/violent nature of a crime, I have generally followed the “property” (petty theft, forgery, larceny, etc.) versus “personal” (murder, rape, assault and battery, etc.) distinction of the original records. In some cases, I have classified a “personal” crime as nonviolent (e.g. abortion) or a “property” crime as violent (e.g. “assault and battery to steal”). Some minor inconsistencies were likely data
While one 72-year-old white man had been convicted twelve times before reentering prison for larceny in 1877, seven of ten Philadelphians entering Eastern State Penitentiary in the 1870s were first-time offenders, and fully 90% had two or fewer convictions. No female inmates had been convicted more than three times that decade. Recidivism appears to have been a relatively small problem in this era, and there was little distinction between white and black inmates in this regard.  

Prison officials tracked the current marital status of inmates upon entry. 75% of women inmates were married or widowed, compared to just 40% of men. The rate of violent crime was approximately the same among male and female inmates—about 30% of all convictions. Black Philadelphians were 8% more likely to be in prison for a violent crime conviction than were whites; African American widowers were two to three times more likely to commit violent crimes than their married and single black male contemporaries respectively. While men frequently committed assault and battery, women’s violent crimes consisted of abduction, manslaughter, second degree murder, and robbery. Just 0.5% of men’s convictions were for arson, compared to about 13% of women’s. While these statistics are not necessarily representative of all Philadelphians’ tendencies, they are suggestive of some basic distinctions in male and female violence in this era. As with the acts of little girls described above, the much higher incidence of arson committed by women among the prison population seems logical given women’s work in their own and others’ kitchens. On the rare occasions that women were violent, they tended to kill,
whereas men were far more likely to attempt murder unsuccessfully, or to assault others in pursuit of valuables.\textsuperscript{143}

Four Philadelphians were convicted of abortion-related acts in the 1870s: three white men for “producing abortion,” and one white woman for “abortion.” The minuscule number of convictions may suggest a lack of enforcement of the law against abortion, or it may reflect the great effort women and their doctors undertook to avoid detection. No African Americans were imprisoned for abortion in Philadelphia in the 1870s, suggesting that the business of midwives—who were far more accessible to black women than were expensive hospitals—went unnoticed by white authorities. Home visits by clinicians like Dr. Rebecca J. Cole were another context in which poor black women managed unwanted pregnancies.\textsuperscript{144}

The crimes of rape and attempted rape represented a small portion of Philadelphia convictions in the 1870s—about 4%. Less than one percent of those convictions (three cases) were assigned to African American men, notwithstanding the period’s common stereotypes about black male sexual predation. The conviction rate for rape remained small and did not change significantly throughout the 1870s.\textsuperscript{145}

Nearly 70% of convictions in this decade were for nonviolent offenses entailing efforts to make money, whether through theft, selling stolen goods, or dealing in lottery

\textsuperscript{143} Admission and Discharge Books, 1844-1888, Eastern State Penitentiary, Pennsylvania State Archives.
\textsuperscript{145} Admission and Discharge Books, 1844-1888, Eastern State Penitentiary, Pennsylvania State Archives.
tickets and counterfeit money. The relationship between these crimes and systemic poverty is difficult to deny. While reformers gathered statistics in their effort to improve the lives of individual criminals, their efforts centered on life within the walls of the prison more than the conditions outside that led people to commit crime. Incidentally, the state’s attention to inmates’ temperance—a common measure of moral fiber in this era—did not demonstrate a convincing link between alcohol use and criminality. In fact, those who abstained entirely were slightly more likely to be represented in the prison population than chronic drunks.\footnote{Female prisoners were about twice as likely to abstain from alcohol as men. There was no significant difference in temperance between white and “colored” inmates. Admission and Discharge Books, 1844-1888, Eastern State Penitentiary, Pennsylvania State Archives.}

The health and wellness that many reformers sought for prisoners is difficult to quantify given existing records, but published statistics for the year 1860 represent the kind of ailments for which prisoners received treatment. Stomach ailments and “catarrh” (sinus congestion) were common, as well as fevers, “rheumatism,” and illnesses related to tuberculosis. Certain problems affecting women included inflammation or “abscess of the mammary” glands. Menstrual issues of “lencorrhea” and “amenorrhea” were recorded, as well as one acute case of “pregnancy” that was “cured” during the woman’s imprisonment. The tuberculosis that killed Mary Ash was actually quite rare at Eastern State Penitentiary in this era: just three inmates suffered from “phthisis” in 1860, less than one percent of the 647 inmates incarcerated that year. This is remarkably low given the epidemic proportions of tuberculosis in the nineteenth century in North America and Europe. One positive of the isolation practiced in the “Pennsylvania System” may have been a lower instance of airborne disease transmission. By far the most common affliction for incoming prisoners in
1860 was a “delicate” condition, which was diagnosed in about 18% of “sick” prisoners. Lack of access to health care and unhygienic living conditions could explain that prevalence. The fragile health noted here was a far cry from the “delicate” pride described in *Harper’s*, which drew a cartoonish portrait of society ladies affronted at the thought of an unstylish haircut. Mary Ash’s twelve-year-old body was too delicate to survive much more than a year of her four-year sentence.¹⁴⁷

Death in prison seems to have been relatively uncommon for black female inmates in this era, however. Mary Cummings, convicted of larceny at age 22, served one year and was discharged in “good health.” Martha Wright was classified as physically “delicate” in February, 1873, but left in good mental and bodily health three and a half years later. Rachel J. Hall had family members with tuberculosis but evidently did not contract it herself, surviving two stays in Eastern State Penitentiary before her release in March, 1876. After a year in prison for manslaughter, 28-year-old Evelina Frazier “died [on the] 4th” of June, 1878, with no recorded cause. She had been healthy at intake, but had a “weak” mind. Emma Gould was imprisoned for robbery in 1879 and simply “died” May 27, 1882.

It was not a lack of suffrage or eligibility for jury service that led some black Philadelphia women to crime for survival; poverty, poor health, and sheer desperation are more likely. While equal participation in the creation of law and the election of representatives could perhaps have alleviated blacks’ economic challenges, poor African Americans likely saw the political civil rights struggle as a long-term issue that could not be solved in a time frame affecting their day-to-day struggle for sustenance. Women and girls

like Rhoda Buck and Mary Ash, were not political activists by any measure that historians can decipher through primary sources. How then should their recorded actions—survival, illegal acts, childbirth, or death—be framed within the broader narrative of the African American freedom struggle?

Historian Kali Gross’s scholarship on black female criminality in the later-nineteenth century has begun an effort to recognize and remedy the limitations of the “freedom struggle” as metanarrative. The story of black history that has emerged since the 1960s, which has done much to dispel racist traditions in American historiography, has also tended to compress the complex individual stories of African Americans into a “customary” set of “narratives of suffering, resistance, and, ultimately, redemption.” Distinct from the written sources produced by highly educated black women, Gross notes, “most records about everyday black women exist only because they mark a moment when a black woman’s life intersected, or collided in some way, with white people,” as when black women prisoners met white administrators at Eastern State Penitentiary. These materials present black women as laborers, as victims, as “problems” that “shame the race or are used to pathologize it.” Even when historians “animate them” as activists, clubwomen, or “freedom fighters,” Gross concludes, we have not revealed the “fully human, and thus vulnerable, damaged, and flawed” historical actors these women actually were. Even this chapter’s emphasis on women’s economic poverty over their lack of equal rights reinforces their status as victims in a system much larger than themselves.148

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148 Kali Nicole Gross, Hannah Mary Tabbs and the Disembodied Torso (New York: Oxford University Press, 2016), 4. Gross’s earlier work stems from analysis of the same archival records discussed in this essay, though from later decades: Gross, Colored Amazons: Crime, Violence, and Black Women in the City of Brotherly Love, 1880-1910 (Durham, N.C.: Duke University Press, 2006). Another important work that investigates black women’s criminality and seeks to illuminate “the range of black women’s ideas about respectability, domesticity, and sexual desire” is Cheryl D. Hicks, Talk with You Like a Woman: African American Women,
This move to make room in African American history for the “vulnerable, damaged, and flawed” is both an extension and an inversion of the scholarly search for “agency”—the term Walter Johnson has called the “master trope of the New Social History.” If nineteenth-century African Americans had the agency to resist slavery, to demand equal rights, or to preserve their dignity in the face of rampant disregard for their humanity, they also had the individual ability to commit acts of irrational violence, to callously choose personal advancement over group interests, or to deliberately choose a life of crime. Poor black women in history bear an especially heavy weight when well-meaning historians ask their scant recorded actions to represent group resistance to economic, racial, and sexual oppression. While Mary Ash’s short life had moments of encouragement, it was unremarkable in the grand scheme of the African American freedom struggle. Incarcerated women in Philadelphia in the 1870s did not fit neatly into a progressive story of victory over adversity that black benevolent women hoped to make possible for them. Neither do they fit a progressive narrative of African American struggle toward increasing civil and social rights. Considering the individual experiences of poor black women and girls whose concerns may have been far from the “political” can help to reframe the narrative of black struggle as a labor for group political agency, to be sure, but also one for individual autonomy and personal power.149

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Records are comprised of 1,255 convictions in Philadelphia County, 1871-1879, possibly representing the same individual more than once. Property crimes are considered nonviolent for the purposes of this essay; personal crimes are considered violent, with the following exceptions:

* Categorized for this essay as violent
† Categorized for this essay as nonviolent
CHAPTER 4.
“Not a matter that concerned our color”:
African American Women’s National Identity and the 1876 Centennial World’s Fair

In the spring of 1873, women of the leading white families in Philadelphia gathered at the headquarters of the Women’s Centennial Executive Committee to solve a nagging problem. As they canvassed Philadelphia’s twenty-eight wards to gather donations for the 1876 Centennial world’s fair, they occasionally knocked on the doors of some of the 22,000 African Americans living in their city—more than in any other city outside the South. While Elizabeth Duane Gillespie, great-granddaughter of Benjamin Franklin, and her ward captains were accustomed to seeing black women workers laundering clothes and caring for children in white homes, they had little occasion to visit them at their own places of residence. Class and sexual mores made private interracial encounters in African-American homes inadvisable for these white women—particularly if black men were present.

Nevertheless, Gillespie had to develop a policy for her volunteers. She could not simply dismiss so many potential donors for the nation’s hundredth birthday exhibition; her committee was responsible for raising more than 10% of Pennsylvania’s contribution to the fair. The committee reached a solution: black women would be invited to assist white ward captains in their rounds by serving as substitutes at any black homes the white volunteers should encounter. As a bonus, this effort to include “colored” women might add a timely flavor of social benevolence to the enterprise.  

Gillespie was surprised when, in an open letter to *The Press*, a respected black female physician rejected the offer and denounced the committee’s color prejudice. Gillespie had assumed that Dr. Rebecca Cole and her friends would be delighted to form an auxiliary “Colored Women’s Centennial Committee” and to volunteer under white supervision. As Gillespie’s deputy Mary Rose Smith later informed Cole, the celebration of American independence did not concern her color anyway, “but only white people.” African Americans, in Smith’s view, should have been grateful for any invitation at all.\(^\text{151}\)

As the Women’s Centennial Executive Committee developed its plan for hosting the nation’s hundredth birthday party, black women claimed the memory and ideals of 1776 on their own terms. Dr. Cole explained that they would have happily “agreed to work in common with American women, not as ‘colored Centennial women!’ [sic] there being no such body in existence.” Cole and her friends had looked forward to assisting with the Centennial exhibition as equal heirs to the Revolution. Black women believed their sacrifice of husbands and sons in the recent Civil War had only strengthened their right to call themselves Americans, without qualification. However, theirs was just one of several competing understandings of black people’s nationality in the era of Reconstruction.\(^\text{152}\)

The patriotic context of this debate over the “place” of African American women offers a rare view of northern black women’s national identity just after the Civil War. Scholarly discussions of African Americans’ attachment to the United States in this era have been dominated by black male veterans’ voices. Men’s expressions of militaristic pride offer little direct evidence of northern black women’s views. Vital studies of southern

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\(^{151}\) *Philadelphia Inquirer*, April 5, 1873. *The Press* (Philadelphia), April 17 and 18, 1873.

\(^{152}\) *The Press*, April 17, 1873.
emancipated women likewise cannot speak directly to the experiences of northern women, some of whose families had been free for a century or more. The timing of this incident is also important: the exchanges between black and white “Centennial” women illustrate a post-war shift in strategy and expression among African American women in the North, who interpreted the war and its effects quite differently from their northern white counterparts. Northern black women believed the war and its impact on the letter and the spirit of the law meant their status as full “Americans” was now beyond dispute. Women like Rebecca Cole were starkly reminded in 1873 that while African American women had gained the abolition of slavery and equal protection under the law, the road to social equality would be long and arduous.\footnote{Michele Mitchell describes this era as one of “cautious optimism for most African American women, children, and men. No longer divided into categories of ‘free’ or ‘slave,’ people of African descent acted upon assumptions that the race was unified.” Righteous Propagation: African Americans and the Politics of Racial Destiny After Reconstruction (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2004, Kindle edition), location 232. Mitch Kachun, “Before the Eyes of All Nations: African-American Identity and Historical Memory at the Centennial Exposition of 1876,” Pennsylvania History 65, No. 3 (Summer 1998): 300-323. Seminal works treating black national identity in this period have generally ignored the substantive intellectual contributions of women, while noting women’s reproductive labor in service of racial uplift. See for instance Dudley Taylor Cornish, The Sable Arm: Negro Troops in the Union Army, 1861-1865 (New York: W.W. Norton, 1966) and Richard M. Reid, Freedom For Themselves: North Carolina’s Black Soldiers in the Civil War Era (Chapel Hill: UNC Press, 2008). Kirk Savage offers a more nuanced discussion of national identity in Standing Soldiers, Kneeling Slaves: Race, War, and Monument in Nineteenth-Century America (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1997). The many important works on southern women include Tera W. Hunter To ‘joy My Freedom: Southern Black Women’s Lives and Labors After the Civil War (Cambridge, Mass: Harvard University Press, 1997) and Thavolia Glymph, Out of the House of Bondage: The Transformation of the Plantation Household (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2008).}

Even as the women gathered in Philadelphia to “fire the enthusiasm of the feminine part of our population” throughout the republic, federal troops continued to occupy southern states, enforcing the national government’s policy of Reconstruction. The black women in the room that morning had not only their own reputations in Black Philadelphia to consider, but the reputation of black people throughout the nation; they understood that
their actions in Philadelphia were important on the national scale as white Americans adjusted to the legal reality of black citizenship. These women's involvement in the Centennial Exhibition would represent to the country—and the world—not only the present status of the black “race,” but the aspirations of African Americans for the future.154

That it was women organizing this work of patriotic celebration is important, as well; Francesca Morgan has described women’s dominant role in patriotic expression around the turn of the twentieth century. The emergence of this woman-directed, “woman-centered nationalism” built on much older ideas about woman's reproductive role in the nation. Since at least the early national period, American women were responsible for the moral formation of strong, patriotic boys, as well as the girls who would one day bear more boy children. Gayle Rubin and Gerda Lerner have each described the role of “carrier of culture” that women have long served; women have been responsible for transmitting memory and communal identity from one generation to the next, whether through their rearing of children or through the literal transfer of property in their bodies among men. That transmission has, in the context of the United States, been couched in ideologies of domesticity and patriarchy that reinforced women’s responsibility for cultural memory.

This pattern was readily apparent at the Centennial Exhibition, where women’s ability to “soften man’s more rugged nature” was tapped by male leadership to appropriately convey

154 Centennial Exhibition Women's Executive Committee, and E. D. Gillespie, “Address of the Women's Executive Committee to the Chairman of the Several Committees of Women in Philadelphia” (1873), Historical Society of Pennsylvania. Robert Rydell has argued that the world’s fairs were rituals of civil religion that taught Americans how to perform their national identity. In addition to their primary purposes, which were capitalistic, nineteenth-century world’s fairs helped to popularize white supremacist anthropological ideas that legitimated white domination and American empire (most famously in Chicago’s “White City” of 1893). The Centennial’s cultural impact should not be understated: one of every five Americans visited the 1876 fair in Philadelphia. Rydell, All the World’s a Fair: Visions of American Empire at International Expositions, 1876-1916 (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1984), 3-5.
a post-war American nationalism that was both new and nostalgic. Referencing an imagined past through women could help men to “abandon local and sectional jealousies” while preserving cultural commitments to white supremacy and capitalist growth.

When the African American teacher Caroline LeCount told a local reporter what participation in the Centennial meant to her, she described a sense of belonging to the American nation that overrode the racist policies of the state. The former Secretary of the Ladies’ Union Association and principal at the Ohio Street public school recounted “the sacrifices and sufferings of true Americans” in which “we participated, not to the exclusion of Mrs. Smith and her ‘Women of America,’ but to the common inheritance of all.” In practice, however, the white women of the Executive Committee differentiated between “colored” women and “American” women, whom they presumed to be white. This binary terminology demonstrates the contingency of black women’s nationality in the public sphere; it was a work-in-progress reflecting both lived experience and persistent racism. (White women’s full inclusion in the American body politic was not yet secured, either, though their racial qualifications were not a matter of debate.) Nationality was then, as it remains, a multi-layered identity comprised of both self-application and recognition of authenticity by other members of the nation.

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Encounters between black and white Philadelphia women in the lead up to the 1876 Centennial awakened the public to profound differences in expectations for the future of black citizenship. These events serve as a microcosm of the shift underway in white northern opinion over the goals and costs of Reconstruction, which in the heady days after Appomattox had seemed so full of possibility. Refusing to yield to white authority in defining “America” for the Centennial, black women like Rebecca Cole and Caroline LeCount defined for themselves what their national identity would comprise in the years ahead; national belonging in the present was inseparable from aspirations for the nation's future. The war and its aftermath had rocked the social hierarchy of the South to be sure, but the North was jarred as well by the emancipation of African Americans. Differing visions of “progress” for African Americans made black women's goals even more ambitious than those of white women's rights advocates, as they fought for sexual and economic justice, but also for an end to racism. Through patriotic writing and events surrounding the 1876 Centennial, black women of Philadelphia claimed civil and social rights based on their status as American citizens and as equals of men; for many activist women in the Reconstruction-era North, patriotism and women's equality were deeply entwined concepts.\textsuperscript{157}

\textsuperscript{157} While scholars of commemoration have noted this post-war “turning point,” during which biracial public events became increasingly rare, rituals of national identity were treated differently—they required performance in biracial spaces in order to preserve a narrative of American unity and freedom. Kachun, “Before the Eyes of All Nations.” On the link between black women's group identity and their work for social justice, see Patricia Hill Collins, \textit{Black Feminist Thought: Knowledge, Consciousness, and the Politics of Empowerment} (New York: Routledge, 2000), 30, 208.
During the centennial anniversary of the declaration of American independence, white women invoked the revolutionary language of equality that had underwritten that earlier struggle. The editor of *The New Century for Woman*, the newspaper of the Women’s Centennial Executive Committee, proclaimed “it was pure patriotism in the first place” that inspired women to join the effort of funding the exhibition. And yet the opportunity to participate was an opportunity to influence. “The women of a hundred years ago had purpose, endurance, and power, [and] they were a part of the nation’s life,” the *New Century* asserted. “Like their revolutionary great-grandmothers, the women of this ’76 are awake.” Elizabeth Gillespie herself assured American women that “this Exhibition will be the means of demonstrating the great advantages that the world reaps from Woman’s Work. ... Every subscription that you gather” will help build “the pedestal on which the American woman is destined to stand.” It is “the birthday of our mother that we are about to celebrate,” she remarked. White women took their own claims to the national inheritance for granted—it was their portion, not their nationality that was in question. While white women held a diversity of views on woman suffrage, there was no debate in the pages of the *New Century* over the right of women to equal work and equal pay.\[158\]

Black women supported their white compatriots’ defense of women with the language of liberty and independence, but they also deployed that rhetoric in forceful opposition to white supremacist ideology. Northern African American women evoked their own long-standing commitment to the United States—and their rejection of racism—in their citations of the Declaration of Independence in public preparations for the

\[158\] *The New Century for Woman*, Iss. 1 (1876), 4. Gillespie, “Address of the Women’s Executive Committee.”
Philadelphia Centennial world’s fair in 1876. Women took the opportunity created by this anniversary to advocate an expansion of access to the public sphere and the workplace in the revolutionary spirit of human equality. Philadelphia women considered the nation’s founding a sacred event, well worth commemorating for its historical importance, but also for its promises not yet fulfilled: in 1876 “all men are created equal” was not a statement of fact, but an aspiration worth fighting for.159

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Rebecca Cole was born in Philadelphia in 1846 to a West Indian father and an American mother, and she quickly learned the hard work it would take to make a respectable life in black Philadelphia. She could easily have entered a textile trade instead of choosing the much harder path to the medical profession; her two older sisters were dressmakers, and her younger brother became an upholsterer. Her mother took in laundry during the war. Throughout her teen years, Cole shared small homes around Spruce and Lombard Streets with her widowed mother, five siblings, and occasional borders and in-laws, likely sharing the daily tasks of housework and piecework. The Coles’ black neighbors occupied a range of working class to middle class jobs by 1870, from factory and skilled craft work to teaching and the law, though there had been few professionals and property owners among them before the war. Cole’s father, Joseph, had passed when she was small, but Rebecca’s family still managed to send her to school. Philadelphia’s Institute for Colored Youth, perhaps the most highly regarded private school for black children in the

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159 My thinking here is influenced by Lori D. Ginzberg’s discussion of New York women in the 1840s whose petitions for suffrage helped make the notion of women voters “thinkable” for other women, for the established male political order, and for the culture at large. See Ginzberg, Untidy Origins: A Story of Woman’s Rights in Antebellum New York (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2005), 6, 83.
mid-Atlantic region, offered free education to those abandoned by the city’s white-only public schools. Cole graduated in 1863 and immediately entered courses at the Women’s Medical College of Pennsylvania. She was on her way up.\textsuperscript{160}

Cole was the outlier in her family of artisans, achieving her position as a licensed physician at the age of 21. She began her clinical work in 1867 at the New York Infirmary for Women and Children, founded by the country’s first licensed female physician, Elizabeth Blackwell, who was white. Blackwell’s autobiography describes the purposes of the women’s hospital as both charitable and educational; in addition to a focus on poor women and children as patients, it would support the training and development of more female medical students. The Infirmary tested “the capacity and tact of the students themselves, before admitting them to walk the general hospitals where male students were admitted.” Blackwell’s teaching hospital was designed with the recognition that women would need “special” training to “maintain their ground” in an overwhelmingly male profession.\textsuperscript{161}

The Infirmary drew heavily from Philadelphia’s Women’s Medical College for its staff, and Cole was apparently one of several graduates to move on to New York. More than

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\textsuperscript{160} In 1850, Joseph Cole reported his birthplace as Delaware, but after the war his children said he was born in the West Indies. All members of the Cole family were identified as “mulatto,” not “black,” in the 1850 federal census. U.S. Census Bureau, United States Federal Census [database on-line], (Provo, UT: Ancestry.com Operations, Inc., 2009), decennial censuses from 1850, 1860, 1870, and 1880. The Institute for Colored Youth, founded by Quaker abolitionists in 1842, funded tuition and books with donations from individuals and local Quaker congregations. Institute for Colored Youth (Philadelphia, Pa.), Objects and regulations of the Institute for Colored Youth … for the year 1860 (Philadelphia: Merrihew & Thompson, 1860). “Institute for Colored Youth,” Christian Recorder, May 16, 1863.

\textsuperscript{161} Registration Record of Practitioners of Medicine and Surgery, 1881-1889, Records of the Department of Internal Affairs, Pennsylvania State Archives, RG-14. Elizabeth Blackwell, Pioneer Work in Opening the Medical Profession to Women: Autobiographical Sketches (New York: Longmans, Green, and Co., 1895), 210-211. In an otherwise encouraging approval of “Women Doctors” in Frank Leslie’s Illustrated Newspaper of April 16, 1870, the male physician A. K. Gardner offers a taste of cultural context, joking that “although it may be queer, I had rather have a doctor smelling of rose and ihlang-ihlang, than of tobacco and whisky [sic], which, it seems, now-a-days, is very generally prevalent among the faculty” (66).
\end{flushright}
clinical skills were offered by the experience, however, as Cole took on a special role that would draw her professional focus to the most vulnerable in her midst. As an assistant physician, Cole took up the newly created post of “sanitary visitor.” Her charge was to give basic health and parenting advice to mothers living in poverty by visiting them in their own homes. This early practice of public health was so successful at averting illness it convinced Blackwell that every hospital should establish such a post; specifically, Blackwell praised the “tact and care” of the “intelligent young coloured physician, Dr. Cole.” From the beginning of her career, Cole’s work involved caring for those people whose financial or social circumstances prevented their adequate treatment.162

When an artist and a writer from *Frank Leslie’s Illustrated Newspaper* visited the Infirmary in 1870, they drew and described a black doctor who was almost certainly Cole. The reporter hoped readers would note “the dark-skinned, but intelligent and intellectual features of the young lady who [is] the first colored female graduated doctoress in America, or perhaps the world.” While scholars have since granted that distinction to Dr. Rebecca Crumpler in 1864, the writer’s sentiment represents a progressive view for the era; the professionalization of medicine that rapidly occurred around the turn of the twentieth century was already underway, and science was understood to be a male domain. The reporter further editorializes on the place of black women in American society, remarking that “we feel proud that those who are endeavoring to wipe away any stigma and impediment which has been wrongly attached to sex, have so boldly and grandly first

recognized the more deplorable evils which have till now, legally, and even yet, morally, been made to appertain to color.” Rebecca Cole’s image is called on to represent the aspirations of black women (and their white progressive champions) throughout the nation. This was only the first of several times Cole would be publicly called on to stand for her sex and her race.163

Rebecca Cole was perhaps too busy with school in 1864 to join her older sisters Sarah and Isabella in the Ladies’ Union Association164, but upon completion of her clinical training in New York around 1870, she too served the needs of USCT veterans and freedpeople in Columbia, South Carolina, during that state’s federal Reconstruction. Shortly thereafter, she returned to Philadelphia to direct a homeless shelter, also serving patients out of her family’s Lombard Street home. Darlene Clark Hine has described black women physicians as “an integral part of the black communities in which they practiced,” working well above the relatively low standards set by medical schools at the time. Cole’s blending of health care with what would later be called social work was common among black female physicians.165 Her broader commitment to social justice for black people can be seen in the various causes she embraced and advocated throughout her career, including


164 The Ladies’ Union Association is discussed in more detail in Chapter 2.

her innovations in medical care for poor women and children in Philadelphia and later in Washington, DC.  

Cole's education, profession, and community service had, by 1873, earned her wide recognition for her "representative" status. Historian Michele Mitchell suggests that such members of the urban black elite were seen by others (and themselves) to embody "the promise of a people." The postemancipation "uplift" work undertaken by women like Cole and her Philadelphia peers "served as a veritable fusion politics uniting African American activists who belonged to different socioeconomic classes yet shared common goals and outlooks." The Cole family demonstrates this fusion within a single home: physician Rebecca lived and worked alongside dressmakers Sarah and Isabella, all of them daughters of a laborer and a laundress. When the Women's Centennial Executive Committee called on Rebecca to choose a group of Philadelphia's leading black women, she selected teachers, churchwomen, and artisans like Sarah to join her in what she called a "representation of every grade of respectable society."  

166 After two decades of service to African Americans in Philadelphia, Cole joined with Dr. Charlotte Abbey to found the Physician Woman's Directory there in 1893, an organization offering women's health and pediatric services, parenting advice, and legal assistance to poor women and their children. Six years later, Cole was offered the position of superintendent of the National Association for the Relief of Destitute Colored Women and Children in Washington, D.C. In 1896, she attended a meeting with Harriet Tubman, Frances Watkins Harper, Mary Church Terrell, and Ida Wells Barnett that resulted in the formation of the National Association of Colored Women's Clubs. Several secondary sources suggest that Cole and Abbey founded a "Women's Directory Center" in 1873, though Hine gives the date as 1893, and a 1915 essay attributed to Abbey claims 1894. As Abbey graduated from the Women's Medical College of Pennsylvania in 1887, the 1873 date is not likely. See Abbey's essay in W.H. Slingerland, ed., A Child Welfare Symposium (New York: Russell Sage Foundation, 1915), 24, and Lisa Grimm, "From the Collections: Dr. Rebecca Cole," The Legacy Center Archives and Special Collections, Drexel University College of Medicine, accessed July 8, 2014, http://archives.drexelmed.edu/blog/?p=29. National Association for the Relief of Destitute Colored Women and Children, Thirty-seventh annual report ... for the year ending January, 1900 (Washington, D.C.: Smith Brothers, 1900), Daniel Murray Pamphlet Collection, Library of Congress. Sterling, We Are Your Sisters, 398n.  

The call for this representative body came from Mary Rose Smith, a white woman of considerable means and social stature. Smith had been born in Pennsylvania around 1822 to Robert C. and Isabelle Grier, her father a lawyer who would be appointed to the U.S. Supreme Court by James K. Polk in 1846. Grier was a lifelong Jacksonian Democrat; he sided with the majority in the *Dred Scott* decision of 1857 that denied citizenship to African Americans, but declared constitutional President Lincoln’s blockades of southern ports in defense of the union in 1863. The Grier family had employed domestic servants throughout Mary Rose’s childhood, including an African American girl named Levenia Parker who was just four years younger than Mary Rose. Sometime between 1860 and 1865, Mary Rose married attorney Aubrey H. Smith, who was appointed a U.S. District Attorney for the Eastern District of Pennsylvania in 1869. He was a founding member of the Union League of Philadelphia in 1862, and was registered with that organization until at least 1878. The Smiths lived without children at 1516 Pine Street in the early 1870s, and employed two Irish-born domestics, Mary Gallagher and Martha Nixon. Martha had worked for Mary Rose’s family for at least twenty years.¹⁶⁸

The Women’s Centennial Executive Committee was a natural fit for Mary Rose Smith, as her benevolent work had included fundraising for national ventures before. It was perhaps logical, too, that she was assigned the task of liaising with Philadelphia’s African American women, as she had served as president of the Women’s Freedmen’s

Relief Association (WFRA) from 1865 to 1867. An auxiliary to the Pennsylvania branch of the Freedmen’s Union Commission, the WFRA was established at 711 Sansom Street in order to consolidate city and state efforts “to plant schools and send teachers among the freedmen,” and to provide them clothes, medicine, and farming tools. Noting that the “battle of force” had been won by 1865, an Association report from around that year asserted there was yet “a great moral victory to be accomplished.” An “undeveloped people” needed “to be civilized, educated, and elevated. Awakened to a consciousness of their own degradation, they are crying out aloud to us for help.” Women were encouraged to form sewing circles, and children “Alert Clubs” to raise awareness, funds, and clothing for the cause.169

Smith and other white women took up the call, believing that freedpeople’s “fate is necessarily bound up with our own.” In late 1866 or early 1867, Smith made a private donation of one hundred dollars to the organization “for support of a teacher.” However, it was in her capacity as president that she led many others to the cause, helping the Association to bring in more than three thousand dollars in cash and over six thousand dollars’ worth of clothing, books, and supplies in the year preceding October 1867. One example of the “noble effort and self-sacrifice” of small donors was that of the “poor little colored child, Edith Webb,” who collected “penny by penny, ten dollars, which she sent to us.” Most of the Association’s funds went to pay northern female teachers traveling south, though one report mentions the support of a school in Virginia, established and “taught by

169 Women's Freedmen's Relief Association (hereafter WFRA), Women's Freedmen's Relief Association, auxiliary to Penn'a Branch American Freedmen's Union Commission ..., ([Philadelphia?], [1865?]), Library Company of Philadelphia. The Pennsylvania Freedmen's Bulletin, October 1867. Smith’s mother Isabelle was a vice president of the organization in 1865. Pennsylvania Freedmen's Relief Association, “An Appeal for the Freedmen” (Philadelphia, 1865), Library Company of Philadelphia. On the rhetoric and policies of civilizationism in this era, see Chapter 5.
a colored man.” Smith describes one teacher, Miss Emma Brown, as “nominally, though quite undistinguishably, a colored woman.” In regular reports printed in the *Pennsylvania Freedmen’s Bulletin*, Smith described visits to schools and her amazement at the achievements of black children who, when given a helping hand, had progressed so far. Smith wrote in 1867 of being moved at the sight of “the simple hearted, earnest teacher, teaching ragged black children in a damp basement of a dirty district, held in great contempt by all her white neighbors.” Clothing, books, and other goods gathered by the WFRA were distributed throughout the former slave states and the District of Columbia, from Mississippi to Delaware.170

Smith probably seemed especially well-qualified to reach out to Philadelphia’s black women on behalf of the Women’s Centennial Executive Committee. She had experience communicating with southern freedpeople who benefitted from the Relief Association’s support, and had almost certainly interacted with some of those alumni and staff of the Institute for Colored Youth who went on to teach in the South. Smith’s experience “working with” black women, however, had rarely, if ever, consisted of cooperative work in which blacks performed administrative or executive roles on an equal footing with whites. Smith’s relationship to African Americans appears to have been primarily a charitable one, in which she delivered gifts and opportunities to the poor on behalf of benevolent white northerners like herself. Without impugning her admiration for the teachers and children of the freedmen’s schools, their pitiful stories also served the benevolent work of the WFRA itself. Smith’s representations suggest that her African American beneficiaries showed uniform deference to their white funders; donations to the WFRA would not be spent on

the more radical, political elements among African Americans. Their actual attitudes can only be guessed at, but a social hierarchy is apparent in Smith’s reporting, suggesting that she was most familiar with and sympathetic toward poor and vulnerable black people. Nevertheless, her social networks put her in contact with Dr. Rebecca Cole.171

By the spring of 1873, the upcoming centennial anniversary of the Declaration of Independence was a frequent topic in Philadelphia papers of every stripe. Working class African Americans expressed hope that a world’s fair hosted by their city would generate new opportunities for work, while black professionals saw “the Centennial” as an opportunity to demonstrate the progress their race had made since the war. White social elites lauded the Centennial’s potential to bring tourists and their summer recreation dollars to Philadelphia, and the chance the fair offered for America to show off its prowess on an international stage. The all-male Centennial Finance Committee established by Congress, realizing it had neither the skill nor the experience to raise the thousands of small donations required for the venture, promptly established a women’s auxiliary to do the work. After its official formation in February, 1873, the Women’s Centennial Executive Committee rented rooms at 903 Walnut Street for its headquarters. Thirty-six women (one for each state in the Union) would be found in each ward of the city to raise money for Pennsylvania’s contribution to the Centennial.172

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171 Pennsylvania Freedmen’s Bulletin, February 1867. Smith is mentioned briefly in connection with the women’s branch of the American Freedmen’s Union Commission in Carol Faulkner, Women’s Radical Reconstruction: The Freedmen’s Aid Movement (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2004), 53, and in various accounts of the Women’s Centennial Executive Committee, though not in her role relative to black women.

172 Philip S. Foner, “Black Participation in the Centennial of 1876,” Phylon 39, No. 4 (4th Qtr., 1978), 284. An additional benefit of allowing women to organize the local fundraising was that “woman can more easily than man interest children in the movement” and thereby “enkindle patriotic fires in the breasts of the little ones.” The Press, April 3, 1873. Gillespie, “Address of the Women’s Executive Committee.”
Mary Rose Smith contacted Rebecca Cole in late March. According to Cole, Smith, who was serving as the committee’s Correspondence Secretary, told her “very plainly” that “as American women had been asked to come forward and aid in the patriotic work, such women should not be confined to any particular class or clique, but must be composed of the women of the land, and whose fitness for physical or mental labor must be the only consideration.” Smith then asked that Cole “introduce among them a colored element to cooperate in centennial work.” Cole took Smith at her word and, rather than simply
gathering her personal friends, compiled a list of thirty-six women she considered representative of the opinions and abilities in her community.\textsuperscript{173}

Cole and her associates were invited to the Executive Committee’s headquarters on April 4. Chairman Gillespie described the nature of their commemorative work as “pure patriotism” and distributed blank subscription books and promotional materials to the gathered black women. Echoing her similar sentiments expressed in the \textit{Freedmen’s Bulletin}, Smith addressed the gathered ladies warmly, praising their support and marking “the opportunity which the Centennial celebration offers for the advancement of the interests of the colored people as a race.” Cole would later remark that she and her group had welcomed the opportunity to “\textit{co-operate} with the Ladies’ Centennial Committee in the great work.”\textsuperscript{174}

Smith had not been entirely forthcoming with Cole about her plans for the black women’s assistance, however. The Committee’s system of assigning women to work in their home neighborhoods would not apply to black women: they would work “at-large” throughout the city. Members of what the Philadelphia \textit{Press} termed the “Colored Women’s Centennial Committee” would be sent into those homes occupied by black people, in whatever wards the white ward captains determined needed black workers at a given time. Black women would never officially represent the Committee on the doorsteps of unsuspecting white Philadelphians; those homes would be visited by white women only.\textsuperscript{175}

\textsuperscript{173} \textit{New National Era}, June 5, 1873, emphasis in original.
\textsuperscript{175} \textit{The Press}, April 17 and 18, 1873.
As Smith explained these terms to the assembled women, Caroline LeCount recalled that the ladies “listened, quietly, astonished, as Mrs. Smith proceeded to tell them who and what they were, and to inform them of the duties to be performed.” Their “education forbade” any immediate outcry, but the room was no doubt full of sharp breaths, raised eyebrows, and sideways glances. If Smith concluded by asking if there were any questions, she received an icy silence in reply. Cole and her friends filed out of the well-appointed Walnut Street office with a taste of bitterness on their tongues.176

The women reconvened that very night—this time without the white committee members—at Cole’s home on Lombard Street. There they were anything but silent. The problems, they determined, were both logistical and civil. Smith’s arrangement would have them “compelled to tramp over the whole city” in “districts where they were not known” in order to follow a white supervisor in her rounds. They would either stand uselessly on the street as white women gathered subscriptions, or be sent running off to individual addresses, blocks apart, wherever a black home should pop up. The women’s time, energy, and dignity would all be wasted working in this inferior status. Additionally, their classification as an altogether separate and segregated entity cheapened their participation, making their connection to the spirit of the Centennial provisional and marginal. They had been asked, in essence, to help reinforce the second-class citizenship that African Americans had struggled against for the past century.177

Cole explained “upon discovery that our work was conveniently assigned us as a distinctive delegation, and that every ward in this city had its own ward committee, we

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176 New National Era, May 22, 1873.
177 The Press, April 17 and 18, 1873.
immediately conferred with the secretary [Smith], and reported to the Executive
Committee our unwillingness and inability to work in any fixed sphere, being ignored in
our respective wards.” Cole and her friends had attended the meeting with Smith’s
assurance that they were to work “in common with American women, not as ‘colored
Centennial women!’” There could not be one set of procedures for “American” women and
another for “colored” women. Cole and her compatriots were bound by loyalty to one
another, to their history and to their country to refuse the white women’s terms. They
asked Smith if they could not “be allowed to co-operate with the ward committees” on an
equal footing with white volunteers.178

Smith’s response was swift and hot. Cole recalled Smith visiting her home in person
and declaring that if her group “could not work as they directed we had better hand over
our books and papers” immediately. Smith further informed Cole “that our admission was
only a courtesy extended towards us, and that the celebration was not a matter that
concerns our color, but only white people.” In fact, “it was entirely optional” on the part of
the white committee members “whether we were allowed to engage in the work or not.”
LeCount recalled Smith asserting that “we had no right to work among white people,” and
then “irrelevantly” raising “the social question.” Smith “even went so far as to speak of
‘remanding’ us to Africa if we were not satisfied with the laws of the land, a statement,
which,” LeCount remarked, “in my opinion, needs no reply from intelligent persons.”

Given Smith’s extreme response, Cole and LeCount supposed they were “disbanded,”
as they would not subject themselves to unequal treatment, having “no voice” in the official
Centennial organization. In an effort to protect their good names, as well as the public

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178 The Press, April 17 and 18, 1873.
integrity of black Philadelphians, Cole and thirty-two women published an official refusal in *The Press*.¹⁷⁹

Elizabeth Gillespie and the rest of the Committee seem initially to have left the matter to Smith, as there is no record of their response for almost two weeks after the April 4 meeting. They were busily preparing a major fundraising event to be held at Philadelphia’s Academy of Music on April 19. *The Press* of April 17 wrenched Gillespie’s attention away from the set list of the Girard College Band, however, as that day’s paper included not only a prominent advertisement for their “Grand Centennial Mass Meeting,” but a public disavowal of their work by more than thirty prominent black women. We “beg leave to inform the public,” the women wrote, that reports of a “so-called colored committee” in aid of the white Centennial women were “fallacious.” (On April 5, the morning after the meeting at Committee Headquarters, the *Philadelphia Inquirer* had announced that “Miss Rebecca J. Cole, MD” had presided over a meeting of the “Colored Women’s Centennial Committee.” “Also in attendance” was Elizabeth Gillespie.) Notwithstanding white reports that the black women were “uniformly energetic” about the plan for segregated subscription gathering, Cole clarified the position the women had come to at their own meeting: “we do here, and forever hereafter, protest against any such injustice, because of American prejudice, which ought to have outlived itself in this hundredth anniversary.” Thirty-three women signed on to the letter, with “R.J. Cole” first among them.¹⁸⁰

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In an editorial comment preceding the letter, John W. Forney’s *Press* framed the story for its readers, expressing its regret over the “hasty action” of its “colored” subscribers. *The Press* nonetheless published their complaint, wishing the women had endeavored “to settle their difficulties, and not force them into print.” Apparently, the editor’s “many conversations” with the white women of the Centennial committee had convinced him “that there is neither a purpose nor a desire to hurt the feelings of the colored people.” If “any of the colored folks were dissatisfied” with being asked to “work among their own people,” they ought to have first appealed to the Committee directly. Cole had, in fact, appealed to Smith and to Gillespie nearly two weeks prior; perhaps it suited members of the Executive Committee to conceal that fact from *The Press* when questioned about the matter.\(^\text{181}\)

The increasing negative publicity spurred Gillespie and her committee to public action, though not before another few weeks had passed; at 5pm on Saturday, May 10, Gillespie and Mary McHenry met with Cole and Cordelia Sanders Chew, a young mixed-race member of the Sanders family that had migrated from Charleston, South Carolina, before the war.\(^\text{182}\) According to an interview in the *Inquirer*, probably given by Gillespie, an “amicable adjustment” was reached after Gillespie listened to the black women’s “real or supposed grievance.” Mrs. Chew, “a lady of much more than ordinary intelligence,” described two problems: first, that she and the other black women “were represented as having solicited the appointments they received,” though they had in fact been invited by

\(^{181}\) *The Press*, April 17, 1873. *The Press* hoped to lighten the article’s tone by including some “comic” tales of the white women’s subscription work: “A daughter of the Emerald Isle, upon being asked to take some Centennial stock, replied in amazement: ‘Saint who? I’ve heard of St. John, [and] St. Patrick ... but, be-jabbers, this is the first time I ever heard of St. Tennial.’ Another, this time a German, declared, ‘I’ve bin in dish country dirty years and never heard of this swindle before.’”

\(^{182}\) Cordelia Sanders and her family are discussed in more detail in Chapter 1.
Smith to attend the meeting. Second, they were treated as a “separate and distinct body” and, “in a word, the idea of color caste prejudice seemed to be a predominant one in the treatment of them.”

McHenry assured Cole and Chew that the whole business was the result of a misunderstanding. “As for herself, personally, she did not recognize the word ‘color’ in its customary application to the human races,” believing most Committee members shared her sentiment. But as the “exigencies of the case … demanded the use of the word, … it was simply impracticable to avoid using the term colored women or colored ladies” to distinguish their committee from others. Chew responded that she “had not the slightest objection to a proper use of the term, for, of course, anyone could see that they were colored, but it was acting out the idea of color that wounded the colored women.” The expectation that black women would simply pantomime the stereotypes most comfortable to white women was dehumanizing. The plan for segregated work—not to mention Smith’s explicit threat that she would have them “remanded” to Africa—smacked of “the old degrading idea of inferiority.”

At this point in the conversation, McHenry explained that “a lady of the Executive Committee” (Smith) had single-handedly conceived of and arranged the “colored committee” that separated white and black volunteers. White ward captains had then instructed their volunteers to skip black houses, not out of racism, but as to not unfairly “take” subscribers from the “colored committee,” which, according to Smith, preferred to

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184 Philadelphia Inquirer, May 12, 1873.
work independently of white women and to visit only other black people’s homes. As for Smith’s comments at Cole’s home, “in an endeavor to adjust matters,” McHenry explained, Smith “had made remarks which could be attributed solely to excitement and warmth of mind,” and “could hardly be supposed to be the authorized expressions of the Executive Committee.” Apparently, Cole and Chew thought this explanation satisfactory, and, after arranging new procedures for an integrated fundraising effort based in volunteers’ home neighborhoods, the women parted with “the best possible feelings of mutual good will.”

Perhaps another meeting at Cole’s home took place in order for this story to make its way to the many black volunteers who had signed on to the April 17 letter of protest. Apparently the “adjustment” was anything but amicable to many of the women Cole and Chew had meant to represent, as Caroline LeCount would tell the New National Era several days later. “To be plain,” LeCount remarked, “the entire sentiments of Mrs. Smith were but a reiteration of those sentiments which have always characterized the opponents of justice. They were a revival of the bitterest color prejudices.” Given Smith’s offensive actions, LeCount and ten other women announced the following day that “[we] repudiate all action which took place on the part of Miss Cole and Mrs Chew, so far as they claimed to represent the colored women” at large. No such representation had been authorized; in fact, LeCount and the others had been ignorant of the “whole proceedings until they appeared in the columns of the paper.” Smith’s “degrading” proposition of segregated work deserved no forgiveness; when LeCount and her friends had accepted Cole’s invitation to be a part of the Centennial work, they did not expect their “womanhood would be compromised, our citizenship ignored or rights questioned.” They were “astonished at the effrontery” of Cole

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185 Philadelphia Inquirer, May 12, 1873.
and Chew’s entertainment of the white women’s belated apologies; “we did not believe any one identified with us would so far debase herself and degrade us by accepting them. ... Clearly ... we were equally deceived in both Miss Rebecca J Cole and the ‘Women’s Centennial Executive Committee.’”

Cole waited for more than a week to reply, perhaps in an effort to let tempers cool. Her sense of propriety and “representativeness” may be read in her opening tone: “Seeing that your columns have already been opened to the consideration of the late difficulty between the Women’s Centennial Committee and the colored ladies of this city,” she told the *New National Era*, “a fuller account of the affair may be interesting to your readers.” Beginning with a reminder of Mary Rose Smith’s expressed desire for a cross-section of American “women of the land, ... whose fitness for physical or mental labor must be the only consideration,” Cole pointed out it was the Executive Committee which had appointed her “chairman” of the women she gathered. When Smith’s actions revealed that color was indeed a “consideration,” Cole found herself, along with the others, “occupying a false and disagreeable position.” After a number of exchanges with the Executive Committee, Cole explained, “we discovered that we had been altogether wronged and misrepresented by an individual of the executive, and not by the committee itself. Some of us were so incensed that we sought redress publicly,” that a “more satisfactory atonement should be made, to relieve the false light in which we had appeared.” When the Executive Committee met the black women in person seeking “to rectify all errors thereupon,” Cole said, “it was then, and only then, that we, as colored women, unanimously agreed to acquit” them “of any dishonorable intentions.” The “Colored Centennial Committee” was disbanded and Cole and

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186 *New National Era*, May 22, 1873.
some others joined their respective ward’s subcommittees to commence the interracial work of fundraising. Cole’s deliberate use of “us” and “we” emphasized the unity of the black women who refused white prejudice, while simultaneously muting the more combative position of “some of us.” Black women, Cole seems to say, are both strong and reasonable.187

As for LeCount, Cole remarked, she and her “portion deem it fit to begin anew the dissension” with faulty information. Turning their ire upon Cole herself, they ignored the fact that it was “the rule of that body” —the Executive Committee— “to confer only with chairmen, and not with the ladies whom they represented.” As far as Cole was concerned, LeCount’s complaint amounted to simple ignorance of how a committee operates; all parties involved had accepted Cole’s “representativeness” of the black women of Philadelphia, however inadequate that notion was in principle. Where LeCount saw a battle against centuries-old structures of injustice, Cole saw poorly executed committee work and an individual’s pernicious racism.188

LeCount’s struggle against Smith was, for her, symbolic of white people’s “dictatorial” and “humiliating” treatment of blacks under slavery. She took particular offense at Smith’s use of the term “remand” in reference to sending black Americans “back” to Africa. “The word is fraught with the most painful associations,” LeCount explained. “It is only those who have suffered as we have that can fully understand it,” as it had been used “when the dealers in the bodies and souls of men succeeded in getting their prey and consigning them to interminable bondage.” It was a term used in the “fugitive-slave-law

187 *New National Era*, June 5, 1873.
188 *New National Era*, June 5, 1873.
days,” and Smith should have thought better of using it in front of “eleven American women, whose only crime in her eyes was that their complexions were less fair than hers.” In fact, LeCount argued, “the word should have been as unpleasant to her as painful to us.” The profound offense LeCount felt illustrates the depth of her hope for a new America, in which the memory of slavery is not cast aside, but integrated into the national fabric—even into white American’s national identity. She held no naïve belief in a “colorless” society—though some white members of the Executive Committee did—but a conviction that the “new birth of freedom” should liberate white Americans as well as black. They ought to have recognized and disavowed the prejudice that tainted the American ideal of equality expressed at the founding a century before.189

LeCount described the white women’s offense in terms that connected their behavior to the broader culture and to the nation’s history of subjugating black people. It was not only the suggestion of segregating the black women, but the process by which they were systematically excluded, not sought out from the beginning as capable ward captains, and presumed to prefer to work among themselves. Patronizing the gathered women, Smith “proceeded to tell them who and what they were,” LeCount recalled. Smith’s self-appointment as the authority over the “colored committee,” in LeCount’s eyes, represented a deeply ingrained sense of racial supremacy; Smith believed she had an inherent right (and responsibility) to inform black women where they would fit in post-war society. It was never so much the logistics of fundraising that concerned LeCount, but the spirit in which Smith belittled black women while seeming to “reach out” to them. LeCount refused to accept the Committee’s apology because they never admitted to declaring “who and

189 New National Era, May 22, 1873.
what" she was. That Cole could allow this affront to go unrectified was bewildering to LeCount.\textsuperscript{190}

A personal experience may have contributed to LeCount’s refusal of the Committee’s apology for such hurtful words and act, as well. LeCount’s fiancé, educator and activist Octavius V. Catto, had been murdered by a white Democrat less than two years before the interactions with the Women’s Centennial Committee. This trauma certainly informed LeCount’s subsequent experiences of prejudice, and perhaps animated the anger and frustration she expressed at Cole’s acceptance of the white women’s apology. The broad context of American history offered reason enough for black women’s skepticism and impatience with racist behavior on the part of the Committee, but the intimate violence survived by LeCount may explain her unwillingness to offer McHenry and Gillespie the benefit of the doubt in this circumstance.\textsuperscript{191}

What LeCount construed as Cole’s betrayal of her race, and perhaps her country, was to Cole a simple matter of taking clumsy white women at their word. Smith’s racist and hateful speech offended Cole, but the surgeon seems to have embraced a pragmatic approach to the exchange that suggests a different view of post-war racial dynamics. Perhaps her extensive work with white women like Dr. Elizabeth Blackwell had made her less susceptible to the daily barbs of a racist culture—the constant reminders of the country’s white supremacist power structure in her daily routine. It might have been her experiences in Charleston, South Carolina, where she presumably provided medical care to freedpeople who knew white power all too well, but needed to feed and clothe themselves

\textsuperscript{190} \textit{New National Era}, May 22, 1873, emphasis mine.
\textsuperscript{191} I thank Lori D. Ginzberg for noting the timing of these events relative to Catto’s murder. E-mail message to author, June 20, 2017. See Chapter 1 on LeCount and Catto.
by laboring for whites nonetheless. Whatever the motivation, Cole did not require the Women’s Centennial Executive Committee to make “satisfactory atonement” for the racist culture in which they operated, but only the actions over which they exercised personal control.¹⁹²

What had begun as a polite exchange among benevolent women turned sour as those involved realized the great distance between black and white criteria for American national belonging. Further, the willingness of some black women to accommodate degrees of racism in their dealings with white women was a point of heated debate. Smith had convinced herself that middle-class African American women would prefer to work separately—perhaps because she preferred not to work alongside them. Cole and Chew believed the racial segregation of patriotic ritual “ought to have outlived itself” by 1873, but were willing to abide a bumpy road forward. LeCount would not tolerate anything short of the highest regard for black women’s equality, and right now. These competing positions appeared self-evident to each woman, indicating that each worked from distinct understandings of African Americans’ “place” in the nation after the Civil War.

Cole and LeCount’s differing attitudes toward white women demonstrate the ambiguity of expectations among black women after the Civil War, when rights were beginning to be guaranteed by law but often could only be enjoyed if boldly claimed in the face of entrenched racism. While Philadelphia’s streetcars were desegregated by state law in 1867, the Pennsylvania state constitution still required revision to align with the federal

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¹⁹² *New National Era*, June 5, 1873. Black male newspaper editors and leaders of Philadelphia’s influential black Radical Club expressed a range of replies to the conflict within the Women’s Committee, from derision of the entire debacle, to concern for the damaged dignity and femininity of black women, to strong defenses of LeCount’s view. See *New National Era*, May 22 and June 5, 1873. *The Press*, June 5, 1873.
Fifteenth Amendment. Even as Cole and LeCount negotiated their relationship to the nation's Centennial celebration, the Equal Rights League continued to advocate a federal civil rights bill and enforcement of public school desegregation. The conflict between the Women’s Centennial Executive Committee and Philadelphia’s leading African American women illustrates profound differences in women’s views of black nationality and activism in a period of significant change. Black women like Rebecca Cole and Caroline LeCount were required by circumstance to make a choice: work slowly and steadily toward full recognition by accommodating persistent racism, or demand immediate acknowledgement as equal Americans.193

Before writing off LeCount’s determination as youthful inexperience or “mere” grief, it is important to acknowledge that while formal legal changes required lengthy campaigns and many white allies, the idea that black people “belonged” in the United States could be circulated far and wide by a group like the Centennial Committee in a matter of days. As a strategy for making black Americans politically visible, LeCount’s uncompromising stance was arguably more effective than was Cole’s patience. That element of national identity that is “invented”—a cultural product of the mind and the heart, and not dependent on formal recognition by the state—could be produced entirely in the imagination. Scholars of nationalism have argued that the idea of a marginalized group’s belonging is not only possible prior to legal and social acceptance, but is in fact a crucial element in realizing material power in the national context. Mary Rose Smith—a northern white woman who dedicated years and a small fortune to the welfare of former slaves—demonstrated that

even some of the most likely proponents of black belonging had not yet opened their minds
to a broader definition of American nationality a decade after emancipation.¹⁹⁴

Northern African Americans’ patriotic commemoration had specific purposes in
their community that were likely invisible to the white women of the Centennial Executive
Committee. Blacks and whites shared the desire to recognize their loved ones’ military
service, assigning meaning and significance to the chaotic violence of war; however, African
Americans had the additional goal of claiming new space for themselves in the American
national imaginary. While the idea of full black citizenship was now no longer a distant
fantasy, it would need to be made manifest materially and locally to become a lasting
reality.

American ethnic minorities in the late nineteenth century influenced popular
knowledge of who belonged, who did not, and who could rightfully claim to be an American
through a process that Orm Øverland has termed “homemaking.” Homemaking arguments,
or the stories that non-Anglos told in order to convince the dominant social group “of the
unique right [their] particular group had to a place at their side and as their equals” helped
to “strengthen the self-image and thus the cohesiveness of particular ethnic groups.”

Claiming similar vintage as the earliest Anglo settlers, or “blood sacrifice” in American

¹⁹⁴ Anne McClintock provides a useful discussion of the adjectives assigned to nations in late
twentieth century scholarship, from “invented” to “imagined” and “created.” The general thrust of seminal
works by Ernest Gellner, Eric Hobsbawm, and Benedict Anderson is that nation-states are generated from
pre-existing nationalist ideology. Hobsbawm summarizes: “nations do not make states and nationalisms, but
the other way around.” E. J. Hobsbawm, Nations and Nationalism since 1780: Programme, Myth, Reality (New
York: Cambridge University Press, 1990), 10. Scholars disagree on the relative merits of nationalisms;
McClintock asserts that “all nationalisms are gendered, all are invented, and all are dangerous,” a notion this
dissertation addresses elsewhere. McClintock, “No Longer in a Future Heaven,” 61. See also Ernest Gellner,
On the phases of nationalist development among subaltern peoples, see Partha Chatterjee, The Nation and Its
wars, or a shared ideological heritage in “freedom” and “independence” helped European
migrants to establish credibility as “real” Americans in their own eyes, and sometimes in
the eyes of others. One successful strategy was establishing “distance” between one’s own
group and African Americans, whom even the greenest immigrants could tell were not
respected or valued equally in the United States.  

The fact of Anglo Americans’ collusion in the global slave trade made African
Americans’ homemaking arguments somewhat more complicated than those of Irish or
German Americans. While black people could easily claim to have been on the land as long
as whites, to have suffered the first casualty in the Revolution in Crispus Attucks, and—
indeed—to share a love of “freedom,” acceptance of these arguments by whites would
require their admission of complicity in the paradoxically anti-“American” institution of
chattel slavery. The benevolent work of Mary Rose Smith provides a compelling illustration
of this complication. Her leadership of the Women’s Freedmen’s Relief Association suggests
that Smith was moved by the plight of freedpeople, who were forced to find a path forward
with little support from their former “owners.” Even her initial communication with Cole
included her apparent belief that the definition of “American ... should not be confined to
any particular class or clique.” Whatever combination of compassion, guilt, or charity may
have inspired Smith was, however, inadequate to prevent her rage at Cole and the other
black women when they challenged her authority over them. Smith’s encounters with
grateful freedpeople seem to have influenced her decision to include blacks among

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“Americans”; Cole’s insistence that black women be treated as social equals upset that belief, leaving Smith threatening to (somehow) “remand” them all back to Africa.\footnote{New National Era, June 5, 1873 and May 22, 1873. The term “remand” is especially instructive. While Smith might have said “if you don’t like it you can (choose to) go back to Africa,” she instead threatened to “send them” back—the act of a more powerful, controlling authority, not a peer. This phrasing reflects the common attitude among white northerners in this era that black Americans were more like orphaned children in need of care than competent adults with an equal claim to belonging.}

Northern white women like Smith could choose to maintain a pleasant fiction in their minds, in which black people could be probationary Americans, their freedoms and privileges doled out gradually as they demonstrated the capacity to manage them. In this framing, black people throughout the country ought to have been grateful for the charity shown them, just like the “ragged” children of the Freedmen’s schools. Indeed, as Caroline LeCount remarked, white women believed they knew, and could therefore declare to black women, “who and what we are.” The incident fomented by white Centennial women’s proposal for segregated patriotic work threw into stark relief the differing understandings of black national identity held by representative women of both colors. In the face of dehumanizing treatment, African American women in Philadelphia chose multiple and simultaneous strategies in order to accurately express just who and what they were.

Notwithstanding their differing responses to Smith’s racism, Cole, Chew, and LeCount shared the belief that black participation in the 1876 Centennial Exhibition was important for the good of all African Americans; it was plainly apparent to them that American freedom and history “concerned their color.” A writer to the Christian Recorder agreed: in 1872, a person identified only as “Brister” suggested that, as “it appears that this celebration is to be a Historical one, ... indicative of the rise, progress and present condition of every species of American Industries [sic],” it should be asked “had the colored people
any share in the work of bringing this country to its present status among the civilized
nations of the earth?” Through two hundred years of “unpaid toil” in fields, factories, and
“on the battlefields of the Revolution, and the slaveholder rebellion,” Brister argued, “we
have contributed to the development of our home Industries.” In fact, “we would have done
more, but for the blighting influences of American absolutism, that hunted, insulted,
murdered, whipped, scorched and burned.” In spite of such injustice and violence, “let us
claim that our labor of the past has added something to the glory of the country.” The facts
were apparent, Brister suggests, but they needed to be claimed and reiterated in order to
have value. It was important to commemorate past black contributions to “civilization,” and
the attendant glory such acts had accrued to the American nation, because it would shape
black people’s understanding of themselves in the future. Brister’s homemaking argument
certainly demonstrated black people’s equal national belonging to whites, but for black
Americans, true belonging would require the recovery and reframing of their own history;
legal and practical limits on literacy, public expression, freedom of movement and of
assembly meant that African Americans needed to be taught their own American history.197

The Centennial prompted at least one other effort at black American homemaking,
this one a reference to the “ideological gifts” given to the United States by earlier African
Americans. The African Methodist Episcopal church launched an effort in 1872 to construct
a statue of their founder, Bishop Richard Allen, which would link black cultural and
religious history to foundational American values like freedom, liberty, and independence.
Allen’s establishment of the first independent black church in the United States exemplified

197 Christian Recorder, March 16, 1872. Mitch Kachun argues that “Brister recognized the tenuous
nature of black Americans’ recently acquired citizenship rights, and saw an opportunity to link more firmly
the race and the nation.” Kachun, “Before the Eyes of All Nations,” 309.
for its later parishioners their roots in one of the earliest expressions of American liberty: the right of African Americans to worship God with dignity. Indeed, the church was the primary institutional keeper of black collective memory before the Civil War. Under the leadership of Arkansas pastor Andrew Chambers, a committee of A.M.E. clergymen planned a life-sized marble sculpture of Allen for display on the Centennial Exhibition grounds in Philadelphia. Hoping to secure the services of the noted black female sculptor Edmonia Lewis, then based in Rome, the committee intended to make sure the “religious, literary, educational and mechanical interests of the Negro would be fully represented” at the fair.198

Chambers managed to bring a concrete African American presence to the one hundredth anniversary of the nation’s founding with substantial help from women parishioners, civic organizations, and sympathetic businesses throughout the country. Chambers presented the plan at A.M.E. churches small and large throughout the eastern half of the United States and gathered more than $4,400 in contributions, many for one dollar or less. While male pastors account for a large portion of donors, extant records include several hundred dollars in donations from black women. In Columbia, Sarah Washington and Sarah Rutherford gave one dollar apiece, as did Hannah Slaughter of Macon, Georgia. Sister West and Sister Wood gathered $45 in New Albany, Indiana, while Sister Sumner[s?] collected $50 there for the Allen Centennial monument.199


199 It is unclear if the “Columbia” mentioned refers to the city in Pennsylvania, South Carolina, or Maryland. Andrew J. Chambers Papers, Schomburg Center for Research in Black Culture, New York Public Library.
Chambers approached a well-known white woman, as well; traveling through Jacksonville, Florida, the pastor visited Harriet Beecher Stowe, who had relocated there after the war. Stowe believed this was “the very thing for your race to do.” While she fully supported the effort to “give civilization to understand in an unambiguous manner, that you assay to be men, and mingle with the wisest and best of this and every land,” Stowe was troubled that any contribution from white people would take away from the spirit of the effort: “if white people pay for this monument, ... where is the glory for your race to come in at?” she worried. Stowe declined to contribute, instead offering advice. Unfortunately, “this don’t pay the artist’s bill,” Chambers reflected. In his travels, the itinerant minister found that even many black churches were “cool” to his enterprise, perhaps supporting the spirit, but not the expense of the plan. In the early 1870s, Chambers discovered, average parishioners of the A.M.E. church could not always be counted on to chip in for the benefit of “the race.” Neither, apparently, could wealthy former anti-slavery activists.200

The ideals of 1776 became newly significant with the passage of the Reconstruction amendments of the late 1860s that enshrined those values in laws applying to black people. More broadly, however, generations of “African American intellectuals and community leaders have expended considerable energy in refuting the common white assumption that blacks have no past or traditions,” notes historian Mitch Kachun. Chambers performed this work in a passionate address to potential black donors: “When the nation’s heart throbs with rapturous emotion, and civilization doffs her crown to Columbia; when from the

200 Chambers letter to [Benjamin Tucker Tanner?], [January?] 10, 1876, Andrew J. Chambers Papers, emphasis in original.
hights [sic] of 1876, 40,000,000 people shall behold upon the golden landscape of 1976
200,000,000 sons of freedom stretching out in varied colors..., let the American Negro be there to swell in glowing anthems of praise the prowess and glory of this the land of the free and the home of the brave." Delivered in church, by a preacher, these words no doubt roused the spirit of civil religion in every listener.201

Claims that black history was foundational to America’s present glory were not new in 1876. Scholars of antebellum black commemoration traditions have found this logic in black freedom celebrations, including Fourth of July events, from as far back as the Haitian Revolution of the 1790s. Genevieve Fabre artfully notes how "the commemorative spirit" was “oriented both toward the past and toward the future. Its mood was subjunctive, the ought and should prevailed over the was: with a feeling of urgency, of great impatience at the renewed delay, African Americans invented a future no one dared consider and forced its image upon black and white minds and spirits.” Kachun argues that a primary function of emancipation festivals was to articulate to mixed audiences “a black-centered interpretation of history which celebrated, on the one hand, blacks’ essential American-ness and, on the other hand their special identity as a people with a distinct history and heritage.” That interpretation served to establish black Americans’ legitimacy in the present and future America. The Centennial of 1876 was unique, however, in that the events of the Civil War and Reconstruction suddenly required white Americans to conceive of real freedom for African Americans. No longer was black male citizenship simply being rambled about by marginalized radicals; it was forced on white “minds and spirits” by the

201 Kachun, “Before the Eyes of All Nations,” 300. Kachun's otherwise compelling essay does not
consider the contributions of black women to the Centennial. “To the Lovers of Liberty,” Andrew J. Chambers Papers.
Congress of the United States. In this way, the years between 1865 and 1876 represent a distinct era in black commemoration—an era in which a promising future for African Americans was, in theory, protected by federal law. Thus, it was up to community leaders like Rebecca Cole and Caroline LeCount to determine the best local strategies for “forcing” themselves into the post-emancipation minds of blacks and whites alike, as they struggled to realize the promises of the war and emancipation.202

The articulation of a proudly American identity—one that would continue to recognize the shortcomings of a nation mired in white supremacy—was profoundly important to black cultural leaders in the years after the Civil War. Many believed it was vital for African Americans to be represented at national celebrations. On the occasion, in 1875, of the centennial anniversary of the Pennsylvania Abolition Society, Frederick Douglass remarked “I am in favor of centennial celebrations generally, and this Abolition Centennial particularly. It is well to mark and observe the beginnings of great and important events in the history of society and civilization.” Congratulating his Philadelphia audience on their city’s preparations for the following summer’s national centennial, Douglass was certain the exhibition would “reflect glory upon our country and upon the world.” He was careful to distinguish between the purposes of the two centennials, however: “The Centennial of seventy-six stands for patriotism; ours stands for philanthropy. One stands for nationality; the other stands for universal humanity.”

Douglass’ distinction is consistent with his antebellum disregard for mindless, uncritical “Fourth of Julyism.” His recognition of the importance of national celebration, however, strikes a conciliatory, even hopeful tone. “There is inspiration in the very thought” of the 1876 Centennial Exhibition. “Here, on American soil, ... will assemble the elite of all nations, kindreds, tongues, and peoples. No argument is needed,” Douglass concluded, “to prove that such a coming together will tend to liberality, peace, and brotherhood.” Now that the war and emancipation had made black belonging in the United States thinkable, the ritual sites of nationalism were a fine place to promote that sentiment.203

Likewise, Rebecca Cole’s patience with white Centennial women’s racism suggests that, for her, the commemoration of black American national identity was too valuable to be disrupted by offenses to the ego, or even the heart. Caroline LeCount’s complete rejection of the Women’s Executive Committee was in fact fired by the same affirmation of African-American nationality (though it resulted in an opposite reaction.) Indeed, expressions of black belonging in the American nation would become a vital strategy for “racial uplift” in the decades ahead; as an act of “homemaking” for post-emancipation African Americans, explicit links to the ideals and promises of the nation’s founding would make a lasting contribution to black American life.

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Figure 5. Contemporary publications offered conflicting images of African Americans at the Centennial. This racist caricature shows a clumsy lack of refinement and an inability to appreciate high art. *Harper’s Weekly*, November 4, 1876, p. 904.
Figure 6. This illustration of Austro-Italian sculptor Francesco Pizzicar's “The Freed Slave” offers a flattering portrait of middle-class African Americans at the Centennial. *Frank Leslie's Illustrated Newspaper*, August 5, 1876.
CHAPTER 5.
Black Woman’s Burden:
Frances Watkins Harper and the Black Feminist Mode of Empire, 1876-1901

In the political future of our nation woman will not have done what she could if she does not
demand to have our republic stand foremost among the nations of the earth, wearing sobriety as a
crown and righteousness as a garment and a girdle.  

Frances Ellen Watkins Harper, 1893

Frances Watkins Harper was an old hand at activism by the time the United States
Marines stormed Guantánamo, Cuba, in 1898. At 73 years of age, the Philadelphian was
counted among the “grandmothers” of the African American freedom struggle in the North.
Born free in Maryland in 1825, Harper enjoyed a privileged upbringing. Her education gave
her opportunities and abilities that most young black women of her era could only dream
of, and her contributions to the literature and thought of African American culture in the
late nineteenth century were substantial. Along with her contemporaries Sojourner Truth,
Harriet Tubman, Ida B. Wells, and Mary Church Terrell, Harper’s public career contributed
to all the major social movements of the nineteenth century. In the 1890s, she put her
skills as a writer and orator to use in support of a global American empire.

While Harper’s importance has been widely recognized by literary scholars—her
book *Iola Leroy, or Shadows Uplifted* (1893) was celebrated for over a century as the first
African American woman’s novel—Harper’s political expression has not received the same
careful analysis as her literary contributions. Well-known and respected in her own time as
an advocate for women’s education, women’s suffrage, African American social equality,

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and temperance, Harper addressed a broad variety of topics in American life. A devout Christian like nearly all of her female activist contemporaries, Harper's speeches, stories, and poetry addressed issues as wide-ranging as personal piety, white women’s snobbery, and President McKinley’s imperial leadership. Harper has been called “exemplary of black nationalist thought” in the period, who reflected the same sophistication and vitality as black male political figures of the era like Booker T. Washington and W.E.B. Du Bois.206

Frances Harper was full of hope for the future of black people in the United States. While keenly aware of the injustices and violence suffered by African Americans, she maintained that the country stood “on the threshold of woman’s era”—a time when the discipline and character of women could lead not only the black “race,” but also the American nation at large, into ever higher reaches of civilization. Demonstrating what literary historian Michael Stancliff has termed “African American republican motherhood” after the Civil War, Harper gave voice to a mode of black nationalist thought that does not fit the binary typically assigned to Washington’s “accommodationism” and Du Bois’s “immediatism”;207 her divergence from the androcentric scholarly categories of late-


207 Stancliff, Harper, 6-7. While the language of social equality pervaded the work of African American intellectuals and public figures in this period, internal fissures emerged around the issue of black Americans’ relationship to the U.S. state. This debate has typically been framed by historians in a somewhat simplistic binary, opposing the “accommodationism” of Washington and the “immediatism” of Du Bois. (Harper was considered an “immediatist” in her time, with important caveats, discussed below.) Washington’s slow and steady “racial uplift” via capitalist growth and moral improvement is compared to Du Bois’s demands for radical action by the federal government, particularly in the decade before World War I. These accounts typically center on the strategies and tactics of the African American freedom struggle in the domestic space of the United States. An influential example of this framing can be seen in David W. Blight, Race and Reunion: The Civil War in American Memory (Cambridge, MA: Belknap Press, 2001). Hazel V. Carby identified this simplification and its erasure of influential women thinkers in “On the Threshold of Woman’s Era: Lynching, Empire, and Sexuality in Black Feminist Theory,” Critical Inquiry 12, No. 1 (Autumn 1985): 263. Thomas C. Holt critiques this tendency of the historiography in Children of Fire: A History of African Americans (New York: Hill & Wang, 2010), 234-35.
nineteenth century African American political speech is due, this chapter will argue, to her investment in the freedom struggle, the women’s movement, and Christianity—an “intersectional” feminist politics not exhibited in the better-known writings of black men. Harper’s black and female expressions of Christian triumphalism would press against, and sometimes traverse, the boundary between patriotism and nativism. In her zeal to bring justice and opportunity to African Americans, Harper created an intellectual path for black women to accommodate the spirit of empire that animated so many white Americans at the turn of the twentieth century.208

Prominent black women worked tirelessly for the benefit of their community, and their methods illustrate a complex set of strategies with rich intellectual work behind them. Their approaches to education, immigration, and benevolent empire require scholars to look beyond the frame of “civil rights” to fully grasp black women’s intellectual contributions to U.S. history. Educator Fannie Coppin dedicated her life to African-American young people as an instructor and the first female principal at Philadelphia’s Institute for Colored Youth, and later as a missionary to South Africa. Coppin’s curriculum embraced the logic of European cultural superiority, though she demanded inclusion in that culture for her talented students. Amanda Berry Smith, Methodist preacher and missionary, took her Christian idealism abroad to West Africa, then returned to the U.S. with a fierce determination to protect her country from the “wrong kind” of newcomers.

208 “Intersectionality” is a theoretical principle developed by Kimberlé Crenshaw and Patricia Hill Collins, which asserts that race, class, gender, sexuality and other categories of identity cannot be understood or analyzed in isolation from one another—that they are in fact coconstitutive. Intersectional feminist theory has been employed extensively by scholars of African American women in an effort to better understand that group’s life experiences and political ideologies. See Patricia Hill Collins, “The Social Construction of Black Feminist Thought,” Signs 14, no. 4 (Summer 1989): 765-70, and Kimberlé Crenshaw, “Mapping the Margins: Intersectionality, Identity Politics, and Vigilance Against Women of Color,” Stanford Law Review 43, no. 6 (July 1991): 1241-1299.
who might spoil black American progress. Frances Harper made her living as a writer and speaker, always advocating for the equal education of black women. Every other civil right, for women and for men, depended on this one, she argued; the future of American freedom itself was at stake. Indeed, just as black women deserved to benefit from the promise of America, the entire world could benefit from the increasing influence, and global expansion, of her nation’s model of freedom and equality. Coppin, Smith, and Harper believed that African American women’s influence could be put to grander use than improving the lives of black people. As two of the six African American women invited to address the International Congress of Women in Chicago in 1893, Coppin and Harper described the world as it could be, struck in the image of the America they were busy constructing.209

African American women have been little considered in the scholarship of American imperialism, either as subjects or as agents of empire.210 Michele Mitchell and Francesca Morgan have contributed important works that begin to remedy this absence, and both demonstrate that sex and gender have long figured prominently in African American political speech and rhetorical invention of “the nation.” Further, black women thinkers in

210 A large literature engages the issue of U.S. imperialism between the Civil War and World War I. LaFeber’s _New Empire_ is the classic synthesis, describing the state’s commitment to market expansion into Asia and Latin America, and the deployment of military resources toward those ends in the 1890s. Absent from LaFeber’s telling, however, are the African Americans whose hopes for full citizenship were being expressed in parallel with questions about colonial “subjects”’ rights and status. For a more recent consideration of imperialism, with significant attention to racism and rhetoric in colonial spaces, see Paul Kramer, _The Blood of Government: Race, Empire, the United States, and the Philippines_ (Chapel Hill: UNC Press, 2006).
the late nineteenth century wrestled with the logical inconsistencies of expanding their own opportunities at the expense of black and brown people in other parts of the world.211

That challenge became increasingly important as the influence and reach of leading black women expanded. With the establishment of the National Association of Colored Women (NACW) in 1896, “the political implications of a national federation of black women encompassing regional, state, and local bodies evoked widespread attention.”212 A set of nuanced and complex responses from African Americans illustrates the ways that activists modulated their language and politics to continue their struggle for social equality even as the scale of their work expanded. Rooted in the abolitionist tradition and the Protestant church, the broad northern community of black women activists employed the discourses of civil rights, religious doctrine, and American exceptionalism in their own search for order and recognition of their multi-faceted humanity—black, female, Christian, and American.

211 Michele Mitchell, Righteous Propagation: African Americans and the Politics of Racial Destiny After Reconstruction (Chapel Hill: UNC Press, 2004). Francesca Morgan, Women and Patriotism in Jim Crow America (Chapel Hill: UNC Press, 2005). The gendered quality of nationalism has been illustrated by Americans of every era when they have described their “imagined community.” Historian of empire Anne McClintock asserts that “all nations are gendered,” because the social construction of an imagined nation depends on binary tropes of male strength and female innocence. This formula dominated Americans’ gendered depictions of their own westward expansion, and continued largely unchanged into the 1890s with the United States’ imperial invasions of Cuba and the Philippines. Harper and Smith employed sex and gender in their own constructions of the American nation with similar tropes, but toward ends that were quite different from those of capitalist expansionists and Republican advocates of empire. Anne McClintock, “‘No Longer in a Future Heaven’: Women and Nationalism in South Africa,” Transition 51 (1991): 104.

212 Rief, ”Thinking Locally, Acting Globally,” 203. The Washington Bee, July 25, 1896. As a “clearinghouse” for African American women’s ideas and chosen causes, the NACW stretched into every state and major city in the country with its network of local chapters. The founding meeting in Washington, DC, linked the organization to the long African American freedom struggle with speeches from Harriet Tubman, then in her eighties, prominent black nationalist Alexander Crummell, and Frederick Douglass. Josephine Bruce, wife of prominent black Reconstruction-era Senator Blanche K. Bruce also spoke, drawing the attention of black newspapers around the country. Fannie Coppin and Frances Harper were both named Vice Presidents of the organization at its founding.
Black women framed the national future in terms that were relevant to their own needs, including a need to share the promise of America with the oppressed peoples of the world. While equal rights remained the focus of African American politics throughout the Gilded Age and Progressive era, black women’s language of freedom would acquire a “civilizationist” vocabulary alongside other Americans’ embrace of empire and the “white man’s burden.” Though characterized as a period in which “the black elite’s faith in the American dream” was challenged, autobiographies, poetry, published speeches, school and charitable organization reports suggest that the “nadir” in American race relations did not cause the disappearance of black women’s idealism and patriotism. African American women’s embrace of imperialisms in the late-nineteenth century complicate scholar’s divisions of black intellectual life into male-centered categories that accommodated white supremacy or advocated racial separatism. The civilizationist tilt of some prominent black women’s opinions suggests that more than “self-help” was on their minds. What Harper called a new “woman’s era,” compatible with American exceptionalism, advocated a third way into the twentieth century for African Americans.213

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After the chaos of the Civil War, Americans sought new guideposts for social and political order, and African Americans were perhaps especially attentive to framing a new national identity.214 When Republican President Rutherford B. Hayes effectively halted Reconstruction after 1876, freedom and citizenship were no longer denied to African

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Americans by law, though by custom, white hegemony was still the rule North and South. Many black American men hoped their service in the Union army would elevate them in the eyes of whites. This theme was pervasive in popular black war literature in this period and beyond. Literary scholar Jennifer James argues “the black soldier-citizen who triumphs over racist practices within these [military] spaces is an embodied index of African Americans’ postwar expectations, signaling his preparedness to compel the nation to reorganize racially upon his return.” While this strategy may have worked for some, the sea change in American culture that many veterans hoped for never occurred.215

Social equality and full civil rights remained elusive for African Americans as the state began re-centering its attention from internal strife to industrial development and the expansion of international markets. Northern capitalists and southern elites imagined a “New South,” wherein raw materials would be efficiently produced and processed for distribution in a globalizing economy. That goal would be achieved, in part, by the conversion of antebellum slavery into a labor regime for millions of black southern sharecroppers and prison laborers. But as industry and capital expanded unabated in the North, Americans with money and power looked beyond their own shores as well, advocating an American capitalist empire that could exploit the labor and produce of similarly “less civilized” peoples from Cuba to Hawai’i and the Philippines.216

215 Jennifer C. James, A Freedom Bought with Blood: African American War Literature from the Civil War to World War II (Chapel Hill: UNC Press, 2007), 29. James addresses a vital question related to the topic of this essay: “What, however, are the implications of using the military and war as sites from which a viable black subjectivity emerges?”

While few Americans would ever set foot in the far-flung places of their military's adventures, white imperialist ideology could be found much closer to home—in their children's classrooms. In the Civil War era, a process accelerated that had been under way in New England since the early nineteenth century: a systematized and “scientific” method of teacher preparation and curriculum development had grown to be accepted as the best practice in education reform. By the 1830s the state-sponsored normal school would emerge from the broader reformist culture and begin to regularize a curriculum rooted in “middle-class morality” and “a bourgeois conception of economic security.” The whiggish values of Massachusetts education reformers Horace Mann and Henry Barnard reflected a commitment to law and order, protection of private property, and “gentility in the interpersonal relationships among the members of a white, middle-class, and overwhelmingly Protestant citizenry.” Mann called for “systematization” and rationality in instruction and in the preparation of the next generation of educators. The reform spirit that animated many white New Englanders in the causes of abolition and temperance extended to their desire to properly educate children. What constituted a proper education was literacy, numeracy, and a collection of priorities that elevated white European culture and religion over all others.217

In the 1840s white educator Catharine Beecher helped extend this system throughout the mid-Atlantic and Midwest in a series of speaking tours and publishing efforts that prioritized female students. Beecher “not only wanted to ‘save’ the nation, she wanted women to save it.” In addition to the sense of moral duty Beecher shared with her

famous father Lyman Beecher, her investment in women’s education helped to define a career path for single women other than “spinster aunt.” Beecher told her audiences that for women, “teaching is a profession, offering influence, respectability, and independence.” With remarkable speed, by the 1850s, and even more so by the end of the Civil War, classroom teaching had become a profession dominated by women. Even as women educators broke down the cultural assumption that men should educate children, the dominant worldview that placed Western white cultures above all others remained intact. This view was predominant among African American women educators and writers, as well.218

Black women’s roles in education paralleled their white female counterparts. While most African Americans in this era deeply valued education in the abstract, the logistical path toward that goal was not always clear, or agreed upon. One issue facing black families and civic leaders in the decades after the Civil War was whether or not women should be included in this push for schooling. Resources were so limited that classrooms segregated by sex were generally not possible. But how should women’s education be organized relative to men’s? Leaders in black education tried to find a balance between “racial uplift” of both women and men, and middle-class respectability that required careful discipline of sex and gender.219

As one of only a few professional occupations open to black women in this era, it was very common for talented female students to enter teaching immediately upon graduation—due in part to the demand for black teachers throughout the South after the

218 Fraser, Preparing America’s Teachers, 36-40, emphasis in original.
219 See Gilmore, Gender & Jim Crow, esp. Ch. 2.
war. The segregation of northern public schools in many cities resulted in the creation of numerous black-run private schools in need of faculty, and alumni associations became a vital social network for black professionals. Philadelphia’s Institute for Colored Youth was long considered the finest example of a black-run private school in the country, and its principal for nearly half a century—the first black female in the nation to hold that title—was Frances “Fannie” Jackson Coppin.220

After graduating from Oberlin, Jackson began teaching at the Institute for Colored Youth in Philadelphia. In just four years she became the school’s principal, serving in that role until 1906. Though she was born enslaved in Washington, D.C., in 1837, Fannie Jackson gained her freedom at age twelve when she was purchased by an aunt. She worked in domestic service as a teen until 1860 when she enrolled at Oberlin College, the first school in the nation to accept both black and female students. After excelling in the men’s courses, Jackson was the first African American student accepted to the teacher preparation department. Toward the end of the Civil War, Jackson established a night school for freedpeople, and in 1881 she married A.M.E. minister Levi Jenkins Coppin.221

One of Fannie Jackson Coppin’s most lasting impacts on the field of education was the curriculum and pedagogical material that she included in her 1913 autobiography. Part memoir, part textbook, Reminiscences of School Life, and Hints on Teaching describes in detail the daily experience of teachers and students at the Institute for Colored Youth. The

220 Public, segregated schools for black students existed in Philadelphia in this period, but were generally regarded as woefully inadequate.

curriculum Coppin describes is a measure of what black educators believed the best practices in education entailed in the last half of the nineteenth century. Throughout the text there is evidence that a civilizationist ranking of world cultures was a part of black students’ instruction, as it was for their white American contemporaries. These ideas were not just hand-me-downs from a white supremacist culture, but were processed and repackaged by educators like Coppin in an effort to prepare her students to make the world a better place.

Coppin’s commitment to her students’ futures in the Civil War era is reflected in an anecdote she selected for inclusion in her book decades later. She describes an instance when O. O. Howard—leading advocate of “Radical” Reconstruction, Freedmen’s Bureau Commissioner, and army general—was invited to the school to see the country’s finest young black students at work. After hearing an oral exam on the works of Virgil, Howard was impressed and “remarked that Negroes in trigonometry and the classics might well share in the triumphs of their brothers on the battlefield.” Howard’s compliment, as recalled by Coppin, linked the bravery and national loyalty of the U.S. Colored Troops to the education of black students in Philadelphia a decade later. For Coppin, the work begun with the destruction of slavery continued after the war with the provision of education and opportunity to African Americans. It would not stop there, either: Coppin believed her students should be no less prepared than white students to take part in the great American project begun with emancipation, even if their resources were still subpar: the thrifty teacher suggested a sheet of unneeded newspaper was excellent material for a “very good
picture of the globe,” if one followed the creases and drew lines indicating the cold and the “torrid” climate zones on either side of the sheet’s “equator.”

Students’ need for religious instruction was a given for Coppin—she explicitly linked their Christianity to their preparation for good citizenship. Each student’s personal faith was important, as was her or his commitment to share that faith throughout the world, bringing the hope and freedom of emancipation to all people enslaved by sin. On an 1888 visit to England for a missionary conference, Coppin noted “the English people were deeply touched by the fact that, tho hardly a decade out of slavery, the colored people had organized for work in heathen lands.” Speaking not only for her school or her denomination, but for “3,000,000” African American women, Coppin said they “send greetings here today and wish me to speak about what their feeling is towards the Christianization of the colored races of the earth.”

You will not, I am sure, deny us the very peculiar interest, as I say, in the Christianization of all races. These poor women less than a decade out of slavery ... have not a whole loaf to share as we all know they have not even a half loaf to share with their sisters and brothers in foreign lands. They have but a crust; but, poor as they are, they sent me here—three millions of those women sent me 3000 miles—to say ... that their hearts are in that work, and that they intend to devote not only what little they have of money and resources to sustain their missionaries in those lands, but they are prepared to give themselves. (119-120)

This generalization, true as it may have been for many African American women, reflects Coppin’s teaching philosophy as much as her personal faith. Knowing that many of her students would go on to be teachers themselves, Coppin demonstrated a common practice in black education in this era, which was to comingle evangelical religious instruction with rigorous instruction in reading, writing, and arithmetic. The women Coppin best represented in these remarks were her fellow faculty members and teacher’s college

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222 Fanny Jackson Coppin, Reminiscences of School Life, and Hints on Teaching (Philadelphia: A.M.E. Book Concern, 1913) 20, 93.

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alumni who took seriously their charge to educate freedpeople, to prepare the next
generation of teachers to sustain that work, and to make Christian disciples of all people.\textsuperscript{223}

These tasks were not discrete projects, parceled out between weekdays and
Sundays; they were one and the same. Indeed, the mode of education that Coppin was
preparing her students to deliver in the American South and on the mission fields of Africa
fit quite well with the latest in education theory; Catharine Beecher’s expectation that
Christian women would save the American nation extended logically to the rest of the
world, and with so much work to do, a “systematized,” orderly approach was in order.

The problem how to reach the colored people on the Western Coast [of Africa] has been for years one
which civilized nations have been unable to unravel, but He, in His own time, will make it plain. ... The spirit of missionaries ... is the spirit of sharing all we have. Those to whom God gives intelligence
and wealth, He gave it simply that it might be shared. (120)

Sharing God’s gifts with the world’s uncivilized nations came naturally to Coppin, whose
experience of the past decades had taught her that the only way for African Americans to
succeed was to help one another. This generosity extended, through Christ, to the entire
world.

All history teaches that those who have had more light from God, or more of the good things of this
life, and who have not shared it with those about them, they have had every bit taken away from
them, as you very well know; and the light passed on, and on, and on, thru the Eastern countries,
westward until it beamed equally on all men, as the Lord God intended that it should do. (121)

Coppin was conscious of the “light” she had received as a person freed from slavery,
afforded a college education, guaranteed legal equality on account of her color, and gifted
with eternal salvation. She dedicated her life to sharing that light of God with those who
had not yet received it. A visit to South Africa, however, prompted new questions about her
conflation of Christian salvation, American freedoms, and “civilization.”\textsuperscript{224}

\textsuperscript{223} Coppin, Reminiscences, pages cited parenthetically.
\textsuperscript{224} Coppin, Reminiscences, pages cited parenthetically.
After her marriage to the Rev. Levi Jenkins Coppin, Fannie spent nearly a decade on the mission field in South Africa, where she cofounded an organization to promote self-help called the Bethel Institute. Coppin considered the chance to work in “the original home of our people” a “privilege that anyone might be glad to enjoy.” Coppin focused her instruction on “the women who had risen above their environments, really noble, faithful, Christian women.” In these lines, Coppin draws a parallel between herself and native women—“our people,” some of whom had already found the wherewithal to grow in nobility and faith despite their lowly circumstances. Like Coppin herself, once an enslaved girl longing to learn to read and write, the black South African women she encountered needed only an opportunity to see the light, she believed, before they would take it and spread it far beyond themselves. But over time, Coppin began to find that the light of civilization held consequences for those it touched.225

Coppin’s confidence in her own enlightened status did not falter, but she noted that native people seemed to want more than concept of spiritual freedom—they wanted to experience it. “I have never found them entirely satisfied with mere abstract teaching of religion,” Coppin observed. “They have religious views before we reach them. Crude, of course; unenlightened, uncertain, speculative, false, just as all people hold who have not been given the true word of God. When those who come to them win their confidence, they readily modify their religious views.” Coppin’s trust that the “true word of God” she freely gave was itself unfettered by cultural bias—enlightened, certain, unassailable—instilled in her a confidence that no harm could come from a modification of primitive superstitions. But with their quick conversion came “an incredible clearness of vision” and the

expectation that "some practical and really tangible benefits" would "grow out of their new relation." In perhaps the same fashion that some emancipated people longed for forty acres and a mule, the Africans Coppin converted to Christianity hoped that spiritual enlightenment would bring them material opportunity. Coppin herself observed that as soon as the native people “learn what is meant by school” they “immediately express a desire to have their children taught.” Coppin’s confidence in the power of conversion coincided with the desire of native people to improve their material conditions and their children’s escape from poverty.226

Coppin was disappointed that native converts were surprised when they discovered their teachers did not always practice what they preached. “They are not prepared at first to conclude, by a process of reasoning, that there is chaff among the wheat, dross with the gold, but, rather, they feel that they have been deceived, and this accounts for some of the lapses of which we hear so much.” Asserting “they feel that they have been deceived,” Coppin reaffirmed the truth of the “word of God” she had delivered; the new converts were unfortunately “not prepared” for the “reasoning” required to justify hypocrisy among Christian missionaries. Still, in other passages in her Reminiscences, Coppin seemed wary of introducing “primitive” Africans to the “blessedness (?) of a civilization that places the acquisition of wealth far above the redemption of souls.” Coppin seems here to have intuited the limits of civilizationist practice, even as she held on to her own hope that she and the three million African American women she spoke for could indeed save the world.227

226 Coppin, Reminiscences, 129-130.
227 Coppin, Reminiscences, 129-130, 125-126, “(?)” in original.
American evangelical fervor in this era transcended geography, as the Christian civilization that Coppin carried to South Africa animated teachers in North America, as well. The same educational and missionary methods that could uplift former slaves and tribal Africans were put to use by a white former soldier who became the leading advocate for American Indian education and acculturation. In the early 1880s, Richard Henry Pratt visited Virginia’s Hampton Institute for freed people while developing his curriculum for the Carlisle Indian Industrial School in Pennsylvania—a strategy that in itself reflects white educators’ stereotyping of all non-white, non-Christian students. He framed his teaching philosophy in evangelical terms: “In Indian civilization I am a Baptist, because I believe in immersing the Indians in our civilization and when we get them under, holding them there until they are thoroughly soaked.” The notion that cultural backwardness could be drowned out of people may have appealed to another (actual Baptist) contemporary of Pratt’s, Amanda Berry Smith. Smith used her influence as a widely-read African-American Christian writer and missionary to promote a similarly uncompromising ideal for the quality of people allowed into the national body; Smith adapted Pratt’s approach to Indians in her attitude toward foreign immigrants.228

Amanda Berry Smith was born into slavery in Long Green, Maryland, in 1837, where her father was able to acquire enough wage work to eventually purchase his family’s freedom. Smith spent her childhood struggling for an education with little access to formal schooling, taking on paid work in domestic service in York, Pennsylvania, and joining a Methodist church there. After joining the Women’s Christian Temperance Union (WCTU) in

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1875, Smith “quickly became a prominent national and international speaker and singer for the predominantly white WCTU rallies.” She was invited to tour England with other temperance speakers and served on the platform committee at the 1893 WCTU World Conference in London. She traveled in India, and ultimately Liberia, where she spent eight years as a missionary in the 1870s and 1880s. Later, in 1899, she would found the Amanda Smith Orphanage and Industrial Home for Abandoned and Destitute Colored Children in Harvey, Illinois.229

Fully immersed in Gilded Age black politics, Smith was an outspoken nativist on the widely-debated topic of immigration. In her 1893 autobiography Smith explained to her largely black and female readership precisely who belonged in America, and on what terms. “If the right kind of emigrants come, we need have no fears,” Smith remarked.

But it is the flood of ignorant Italians, uneducated and untrained, and poor Polish Jews, and Irish, and Germans, who have no interest in America whatever, only for what they can get out of it, have no love for its institutions, no love for its government, have not been taught any of its principles, don’t know anything about them, and don’t care to—these are the people that we don’t want in America; women ignorant, men ignorant, and, of course, herds of children equally ignorant....230

There is little to distinguish Smith’s ideas here from the “100% Americanism” of her white contemporary, Senator Henry Cabot Lodge, who decried the “flood of low-class labor which would absolutely destroy good rates of wages among American workingmen ... , and which at the same time threatened to lower the quality of American citizenship.” Smith’s desire to preserve the quality of American character by barring the ignorant, the poor, the alcoholic, and their “herds” of children, is not dissimilar from the words of 310 presumably white


citizens of Clearfield County, Pennsylvania, who in 1863 feared that Lincoln’s Emancipation Proclamation would have the effect of “forcing upon our state an immense horde of idle, thieving, and vagabond negroes ... of which we have already an ample sufficiency.” Smith implied that she was qualified to be the arbiter of who was and who was not American, a role that was by no means widely afforded to black people in this era. Yet for Smith, the people “we don’t want in America” were easily differentiated from intelligent and cultured women like herself. Skin color, to Smith, was not relevant.231

Black nativism may at first seem to be a paradox. Indeed, the white supremacist mode of nativism so prevalent from the 1880s into the twentieth century made nativism and racism nearly inseparable in their application; but historian of migration John Higham carefully distinguished between the terms. “Racism,” Higham argued, “divided the whole of creation into hierarchized types. It was more consistently concerned with horizontal distinctions between civilization and barbarism than it was with boundaries between nation-states.” Nativism, on the other hand, “always divided insiders, who belonged to the nation, from outsiders who were in it but not of it.” Nativism “signaled danger,” while racism “spelled degradation.” Most importantly, nativism could countenance assimilation where racism could not. African-American nativism, then, need not be understood as “white supremacist”; it was instead an expression of black Americans’ concern for the moral character of their country, and for their own place in its hierarchies. Given

representations of African-Americans in much of the literature on nativism, however, it is understandable that “black nativism” seems a contradiction in terms.\textsuperscript{232}

Black Americans appear regularly in accounts of nineteenth-century nativism, though rarely as individuals or thinkers. They appear most commonly as a foil against which European immigrants trumpeted their own superior claims to Anglo-Saxonism. Such claims have been richly documented in works on the history of whiteness, typically in the context of labor struggles in northeastern cities.\textsuperscript{233} The New York City draft riots of 1863 were a particularly dramatic (though by no means isolated) episode of viciousness by primarily Irish immigrants toward African-Americans. Irish-American Democrats attributed their own economic struggle and poor treatment by nativists to the racial egalitarianism of the Republican Party and the “criminality” of blacks. Their burning of several black homes and institutions that summer, including the Colored Orphan Asylum, stands as a particularly heinous expression of a longstanding inter-ethnic conflict.\textsuperscript{234}

\textsuperscript{232} John Higham, Strangers in the Land: Patterns of American Nativism, 1860-1925 (1955; repr., New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 2002), 333, 335. While Higham’s Strangers in the Land still dominates scholarship on U.S. nativism (summarized as anti-Catholic, Anglo-Saxon supremacist, and deeply frightened of radicalism), in a 2002 epilogue, Higham acknowledges his study deliberately excluded the “frictions” between ethnic minorities. He later came to regard this omission as “a major shortcoming” of the work. However, a related point, present and vital in Higham’s original text, is the significant assertion that nativism and racism “were different things, though often closely allied.”


\textsuperscript{234} Pfeifer asserts “Irish Catholic ethnic solidarity was as pivotal to the emergence of racial violence as [was] a developing concept of ‘whiteness.’” Irish-American “lynchers reinterpreted Old World practices of communal violence in an unfamiliar and seemingly hostile American legal and social context by resorting to collective murder as retaliation for crimes against fellow Irish.” Michael J. Pfeifer, “The Northern United States and the Genesis of Racial Lynching: The Lynching of African Americans in the Civil War Era,” The Journal of
Close examination of these events by scholars of black nativism has demonstrated more than racist hatred was at play, however. While northern white employers seemed always to prefer white workers, “the circumstances under which black workers would be preferred were very much colored (as it were) by the threat of labor strife.” Urban industrialists honored profits over even white supremacy, and Republican-leaning editors were quick to note the consequences of Irishmen’s apparently violent nature. *Harper’s Weekly* assumed that “employers who heretofore have preferred Irishmen to negroes are now going to take into consideration the riotous propensities of the former ... [and] extend a helping hand to the oppressed race.” With such limited capital at hand, African Americans could hardly turn down the jobs created by such sentiments entirely on principle; the profit motives of capitalists were an ever-present pressure on relations among unskilled laborers. Yet black nativism traveled along a different path from the anti-Catholic conservatism of wealthy white employers in the nineteenth century.235

Nativist sentiments emerged as early as the 1830s among prominent black northern abolitionists like James McCune Smith and Robert Purvis, though such attitudes followed a very different progression than those of white “native Americans.” McCune Smith wrote that the Irish “go to the polls in flocks at the bidding of their priests and by force of brute numbers help Rome establish a foothold among the ruling elements of our land.” Purvis cited Irish and German intemperance, complaining that European immigrants were “the

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most turbulent and most insolent class of the whole American population.” One black neighborhood in Boston circulated a petition to keep Irish people out of housing on their street. McCunes’ remarks aside, fears of radicalism and Catholicism were unconvincing to most African Americans, whose own subjugation was rarely defined by political or religious difference. Viewing the nativist Know-Nothing party of the 1850s as an “irrelevant diversion created by pro-slavery interests,” black writer and social critic William Wells Brown noted that he had recently come across “a certain Know-Nothing whose nearest neighbors say he had a claim to that name long before a certain party came into existence.”

The black press did not express significant concern about new immigrants until their vast numbers became tangible in poor urban neighborhoods and workplaces in the North. While German migrants’ relative wealth compared to the Irish made many African-Americans more tolerant of their presence (as Germans were less likely than Irish migrants to compete with blacks for unskilled employment), the urban Irish presented a different challenge. By the middle of the nineteenth century, black leaders were becoming especially agitated by Irish immigrants’ racist violence toward blacks. While historians of whiteness have asserted that practices of anti-black racism were vital to the process of Irish workers “becoming white” and gaining the attendant social privileges, a framing that is less dependent on a black/white dichotomy is productive for understanding ethnic conflict in this period.

Historian Orm Øverland posits that groups of every non-Anglo ethnicity generated “homemaking myths,” told both to white “natives” and to fellow immigrants, in order to adapt themselves to the social hierarchy of the United States upon arrival. Myths of foundation (“we were here first or at least as early as you were”); blood sacrifice (we fought alongside you to defend this land); and ideological gifts (“the ideas we brought with us are American ideas”) helped newcomers to create room for themselves in the American national imaginary. Non-Anglo groups deployed multiple strategies and rhetorics to claim their legitimate belonging to both the ideological and the physical space of “America.” African Americans attempted all of these rhetorical strategies in vigorous defense of their claims to full citizenship and social equality.238

That cultural work undertaken by so many immigrants was ironically vital to Amanda Berry Smith, as well. She may have distinguished her own nativism from the fear-mongering of Anglo-American Republicans like Henry Cabot Lodge by her willingness to work personally with the ignorant and the poor to lift them to the level of civilization that Americans like her had attained. As a Baptist missionary to Liberia, she offered native African Americans the presumed gifts of Western culture, chief among them eternal salvation. Smith simply reversed her nativist fears about the wrong kind of people coming to America when discussing her opinion of African-American emigration to Liberia. First, she cites African-American homemaking myths, arguing for the legitimate place of black people in the U.S.

238 This is not to suggest that Anglo-Americans did not or do not generate their own ethnic mythologies. Their hegemonic cultural presence, however, has made their myths the norm against which “others” are compared. The term “myth” should neither be misconstrued to suggest that such rhetoric has no basis in fact. Orm Øverland, Immigrant Minds, American Identities: Making the United States Home, 1870-1930 (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2000), 19.
and rejecting the racist, cynical desire of some whites to displace blacks in favor of “foreigners”:

Let the white people who want the Negro to emigrate to Africa so as to make more room for the great flood of foreigners who come to our shores, know that there is a place in the United States for the Negro. ... [African Americans] are real American citizens, and at home. They have fought and bled and died, like men, to make this country what it is. And if they have got to suffer and die, and be lynched, and tortured, and burned at the stake, I say they are at home.239

Unique to African American expressions of the “blood sacrifice” myth is the reality that African Americans had fought in conventional wars for the nation-state, but also in “wars” against its white inhabitants and leaders, by suffering lynching, degradation, and the institution of slavery itself. That sacrifice, both alongside white Americans and at their hands, was reason enough for Smith to argue that black people had more right than “the great flood of foreigners” did to “a place in the United States.”

When Smith pivots to a discussion of Liberia, however, she demonstrates an additional layer of complexity in her black nativism:

I am often asked if I favor colored people’s emigrating to Liberia, Africa. ... My answer is, “Yes,” and “No.” ... Yes, if the right kind of emigrants go. ... If educated, industrious, intelligent black men, with money, would go there, for the love of the race, and with the love of God in their hearts, ... then I say, yes, emigrate.

... On the other hand, I say “No.” For I don’t believe it is right to take out men and women indiscriminately, and generally of the poorest that are in the South, ... ignorant of the principles, and the need and duties of the Liberian government, as the poor, ignorant Italians, or Polish Jews, or others, with no knowledge of the country or its customs, no love for it in any way, only what they get out of it, have not been taught, have no love of loyalty, only as they may borrow it for selfish ends, then I say, “No, No!”

What Smith describes here is her missionary zeal for “the right kind” of African Americans to take their education and industry—their civilization—to the Liberian people. Smith here taps the familiar Progressive Era argument for bringing improvement to the world, but not without first establishing African Americans’ equal legitimacy among the “civilized.” She

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239 Smith, Autobiography, 452.
acknowledges, however, in terms that demonstrate her status as a northern, middle-class “race woman,” that not all African-Americans have yet attained the qualities required for this civilizing mission. “Like many of the foreigners that come” to the United States, she admits, black Americans “are not all industrious; and to be poor, and ignorant, and lazy, is bad enough at home. But to be seven thousand miles away in a heathen country, is ten times worse.” Linking anti-immigrant sentiment to intra-ethnic class-consciousness, evangelical fervor, and the obligations of civilized people indicates the complexity of prejudice in the late-nineteenth-century United States.  

Smith’s perspective is complex in the ways that it both expresses and responds to her race, gender, and class positions. She is fiercely proud of her community. Suggesting her experience strengthened her claims to Americanness, she describes the ways enslaved Americans and black Union soldiers literally made “this country what it is,” arguing further that if black people “have got to suffer and die, and be lynched, and tortured, and burned at the stake, I say they are at home.” Her autobiography embraces the widely-held belief of her era that black women’s rise was tied to that of “industrious, intelligent black men”; even her own celebrated preaching and leadership abilities took her to Liberia only alongside her husband. While struggling to defend her country from the masses of ignorant foreigners arriving daily, Smith simultaneously acknowledges that ignorance need not be imported. Her concern that some black people emancipated in the 1860s were still “poor, 

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and ignorant, and lazy” and not up to the challenges of behaving in a “civilized” manner demonstrates her realism about the state of black education and economic opportunity, but also, perhaps, her frustration that more African Americans had not followed in her footsteps from enslavement to erudition and elegance.

The expression of nativist ideas was not limited to black elites, however. The most common sites of encounter between African Americans and recent European immigrants in the urban North were in spaces of work. A common practice amidst the nativism and racism of nineteenth-century labor practice was the pitting of immigrant union members against black laborers, to the benefit of white employers. Denied membership by most industrial unions, black workers could often gain access to skilled occupations (and the possibility such jobs offered for gaining more advanced skills) only by serving as strikebreakers. By the 1890s, African-Americans had already become stereotyped as a “scab race.” Constrained by racism from both labor unions and society at large, some black workers and their advocates tended toward nativism, touting their loyalty to America and its free market capitalism in a unique expression of the “ideological gifts” myth of homemaking.241

While historians have documented the brutal state-suppression of labor actions in this period, the position of working-class African Americans on the margins illustrates the difficulty of parsing race from class from nationality at the height of turn-of-the-century

241 Breitzer, “Race, Immigration, and Contested Americanness,” 271. In Paul Laurence Dunbar’s short story “At Shaft 11” (1898), the author depicts black coal miners reporting faithfully to work when Irish-American union members demand unreasonable privileges. Ultimately the union instigates an armed attack on the strike breakers, but the brave black miners hole up in an assembly room and fight them off: “groans, shrieks, and curses rang out as the assailants scampered helter-skelter back to the friendly rocks,” Dunbar writes, “leaving more of their dead upon the ground behind them.” With help from the U.S. Army, the black workers prevail; the Irish die fighting, or wander off, or slink back to work alongside the victorious miners (and their friendly white foreman). Dunbar, Folks From Dixie (New York: Dodd, Mead, and Co., 1899), 229.
nativism. Black workers, necessarily unable to strike in working-class solidarity with Irishmen due to their exclusion by most unions, considered both the survival of their families and the future of their “race” as they chose from among various impossible options. Derided variously as “scabs,” who worked when they shouldn’t, or layabouts, who wouldn’t work at all, some African Americans adopted a nativist distrust of Irish-American “radicals” and “Romanists,” taking work on the terms with which it was offered. Most black women would have had difficulty rejecting household income from any source; they may even have shared Amanda Berry Smith’s belief that “the flood of ignorant Italians, ... poor Polish Jews, and Irish, and Germans” were “the people that we don’t want in America.”

A well-known contemporary of Smith’s was more optimistic, and less inclined to write off the millions of foreigners arriving on American shores in the 1880s and 90s. Frances Ellen Watkins Harper was one of the best-known black American woman writers in the decades after Reconstruction, due to her steady contributions to the Christian Recorder, several novels and volumes of poetry, and an intensive travel and speaking schedule she kept up into old age. Inherent in Harper’s works was a deep-seated hopefulness for the future of African Americans—especially women—and for the nation in general. Blending the influences and vocabularies of abolitionism, the black church, women’s rights, and temperance activism, Harper did not share Smith’s fears of welcoming...

242 By the 1920s “African American labor activists found themselves in an interesting paradox—on the one hand, they knew that African Americans clearly would and did benefit from the “closing of the gates” against immigrants.... On the other hand, as the decade went on, the benefits African American workers gained from this new inclusion in the workplace gave many civil rights and labor leaders new confidence to seek to build interracial alliances, including with ethnic white workers.” The New Deal coalition of African-American workers, “ethnic white workers,” and others represented another incarnation in the struggle for black civil rights, with mixed results. By then, however, African-American homemaking myths of “loyalty” to the nation had begun to shift to reflect the conditions of a later time. Breitzer, “Race, Immigration, and Contested Americanness,” 279.
too many “ignorant” migrants. The solution to injustice that Harper preached throughout her career was loyalty to the American ideal—the liberty and equality that was for so long promised, and for so long denied to so many. In an early letter regarding a New England speaking tour in 1854, Harper noticed people in her audiences who were “Anti-Slavery, Anti-rum and Anti-Catholic,” but focused on “the noblest types” of women who were “for putting men of Anti-Slavery principles in office” and “sending men to Congress who will plead for our down-trodden and oppressed brethren, our crushed and helpless sisters, whose tears and blood bedew our soil.” Harper was less concerned about the purity of America’s blood than she was with the nation's ability to live up to its own potential; she was confident that the idea of America would overcome the corruptions of American politics.243

Harper’s confidence in the promise of American ideals grew from her positive encounters with learning and activism from a young age. Frances Ellen Watkins was born into a free black family in Baltimore, Maryland, in 1825. Frances grew up in the home of her uncle William Watkins, a vocal advocate for civil rights and an instructor at Baltimore’s Academy for Negro Youth. In her uncle’s home and classrooms, Frances began a long life dedicated to the written word. Publishing her first poems in abolitionist papers at the age of fourteen, Frances first made her living in domestic service and then by teaching in Ohio and Pennsylvania. In Philadelphia she met the abolitionist, composer, and Underground Railroad “conductor” William Grant Still, who contributed to her radicalization and to her confidence as a writer and public speaker. Harper lived “a life in which the personal and the

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public were merged in an effort to realize the moral, social, and economic development of society.” Ultimately her commitments to civil rights, temperance, and “racial uplift” took her away from the classroom and into the public sphere, but the value she placed on education is everywhere apparent in her works.244

Much lauded as the “Bronze Muse” in her own era, later twentieth-century scholars found Frances Harper’s245 literary work to be of interest “more for the history that surrounds it than for great literary merit.” Much of Harper’s poetry and her best-known novel, Iola Leroy; or, Shadows Uplifted (1892), is written in a sentimental, romantic style. Though celebrated as one of the original African-American “protest” poets, Harper has been generally contextualized as a minor literary figure in the early struggle for black civil rights who happened to pay special attention to women and to temperance. The significance of Harper’s poetry, short stories, and speeches may seem small when measured against the great lights of African-American letters in the era, like Frederick Douglass, William Wells Brown, and Paul Laurence Dunbar. This reduced assessment of Harper may stem as much from scholarly framing as from her actual abilities. Harper’s chosen focus on themes beyond equal rights, such as illiteracy, domestic abuse, temperance, women’s suffrage, and the destiny of the United States do not fit snugly into the progressive narrative of the African American freedom struggle. While deeply embedded in abolitionism and then the civil rights struggle, Harper’s works considered


245 Frances Watkins took the name of her husband Fenton Harper when they married in 1860, though he died just two years later (Foster, Brighter Coming Day, 18.) For “Bronze Muse,” see Graham, Literary Biography, 164.
areas of black life that tended to create internal debate—between men and women, accommodationists and separatists, and even darker and lighter-complexioned black people.\textsuperscript{246}

In January of 1874, Harper addressed the much-debated issue of coeducation in the \textit{Christian Recorder}, the organ of the African Methodist Episcopal Church based in Philadelphia. Harper regularly published poetry and short fiction in the black press, and her “Fancy Sketches” became a semi-regular feature in the \textit{Recorder}. As the paper’s editors worked under the close scrutiny of A.M.E. Church leaders in Philadelphia, it is telling that Harper’s work was repeatedly printed in its pages; her presentation of upright, Christ-centered black uplift was a model for aspiring middle-class African-American homes, and its influence was broad. The \textit{Recorder’s} long-term investment in the education of black Americans was deliberate, as Bishop Daniel A. Payne noted in 1891: by the end of the nineteenth century the publishing arm of the A.M.E. Church was “an institution, which ... has continued to grow in power and influence.” With wit and close attention to the sensibilities of her mainstream African-American audience, Harper explicated her progressive feminist view within the well-appointed parlor of an urban black home.\textsuperscript{247}

The scene opens as a young woman, Jenny, finds her aunt reading the day’s mail. “Why Aunty, what makes you look so serious this morning[?] You look as sober as if some

\textsuperscript{246} Harper had been known as the first African-American woman novelist until 1982, when Henry Louis Gates, Jr., recovered Harriet Wilson’s \textit{Our Nig} (1859) to claim that distinction (Foster, \textit{Brighter Coming Day}, 23).

dear old widower had made you an offer to take care of him and his six motherless children. Let me inquire in poetic parlance— ‘Why that shadow on thy brow?’”

“Aunty” replies that she has just received a letter from a young woman friend who, after many struggles to obtain an education, has had her women’s school closed by a state move toward coeducation. The student writes:

‘The tidal wave of progress has reached us here and I feel that the ground has suddenly slidden from under my feet. The authorities have closed my school, and like Othello “my occupation is gone.” ... The wide field of domestic duty is before me, [and] perhaps you will call it false pride, but I do not feel that I have either inclination or aptitude for that mode of life ... What am I to do?’

The younger niece, whose personality and politics bear a striking resemblance to Harper’s, replies “Well, Aunty, while I can not help rejoicing at the passage of this bill, I can not fail to sympathise with those young girls who have fitted themselves for the position of teachers.” Jenny reflects further: “I do wish we women could vote. It seems to me that the men who vote, find in that vote increased advantage, and I do wish that at the late National civil rights meeting, some wom[e]n had been sent as delegates.”

The niece supports the move toward coeducation as “one of those reformatory or revolutionary schemes” that causes temporary discomfort in the pursuit of long-term progress. For her (and for Harper) the equality of men and women is better affirmed by “mixed” education than by separate training according to sex. Where some female students complained that coeducational classrooms made them second-class pupils, Harper’s fictional counterpart counsels that such “present pain eventuates in permanent good,” suggesting that in time, male students would treat female students as equals.249

249 Gilmore, Gender & Jim Crow, 39.
As in Harper’s poetry, the setting and affect of this “Fancy Sketch” reflect a middle-class domesticity that many supporters of “racial uplift” advocated and encouraged, both as self-respect for the “race,” and as evidence to white readers that stereotypes about black people’s backwardness were inaccurate. But even this short newspaper piece demonstrates Harper’s skilled negotiation of multiple audiences and multiple strategies in the contemporaneous struggles for equal rights according to skin color and sex. Harper uses a polite conversation among ladies in the domestic space of the home to ease her black, female readers into agreement on woman suffrage and the importance educating black women.

Harper’s story includes only one mention of “race,” and that an incidental reference to “colored men’s” civil associations (Foster, 230): the writer’s commitment to equal rights for African Americans goes without saying to her Christian Recorder readers. What she stresses in this popular literary mode, however, is the struggle of black women within that larger struggle against racism. Delivered thus in the pages of the leading black periodical, Harper protects her messages of sex equality and woman suffrage from accusations of radicalism or disloyalty to the “race’s” common cause. She knows her audience, and uses her mastery of popular forms to sweeten her feminist critique. Harper delivered women’s rights as a kind of Trojan horse in the pages of the most respectable black newspaper in the nation.

Harper demonstrated the same commitment to suffrage with a different strategy for a different audience nine years later, in a poem that is somehow playful and light despite its
serious content. In these excerpts from “John and Jacob,” published in the New York 
Freeman in November 1885, two black men banter on the topic of women’s rights. 250

*Jacob* / I don’t believe a single bit / In those new-fangled ways / Of women running to the polls / And voting nowadays. … Pray, who would stay at home to nurse, / To cook, to wash, and sew, / While women marched unto the polls? / That’s what I want to know.

*John* / Who stays at home when Betsy Ann / Goes out day after day / To wash and iron, cook and sew, / Because she gets her pay? / I’m sure she wouldn’t take quite so long / To vote and go her way, / As when she leaves her little ones / And works out day by day.

Jacob is concerned that women are too busy with their proper household roles to be burdened by the additional time commitment of voting. John is incredulous; somehow

Betsy Ann already does her own domestic chores, plus those of her employer, even while caring for her own children. A trip to the polls couldn’t add much to that harsh schedule.

Notably, Harper chooses a male respondent to Jacob’s commonly held concern over domestic propriety; what some readers might deride as screeching complaint or individual attitude from a woman might get more respect from the mouth of a man.

John continues to build the case for women’s suffrage:

*John* / The masters thought before the war / That slavery was right: / But we who felt the heavy yoke / Didn’t see it in that light. / Some thought that it would never do / For us in Southern lands, / To change the fetters on our wrists / For the ballot in our hands. / Now if you don’t believe ’twas right / To crowd us from the track, / How can you push your wife aside / And try to hold her back?

Harper works with various appeals here, referring her readers to the hypocrisy of formerly enslaved men further “yoking” their women with limits on their political participation.

Though by the time of this publication bondage was already one generation past, the images and injustices of slavery were still potent discursive tools. John speaks from his experience as a Southern slave, his former bondage now authenticating his views, as does his gender. Jacob ultimately sees the light, thoroughly convinced by John’s rebuttals.

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Jacob / Well, wrong is wrong, and right is right, / For woman as for man; / I almost think that I will go / And vote with Betsy Ann.

John / I hope you will, and show the world / You can be brave and strong— / A noble man, who scorns to do / The feeblest woman wrong.

Within the form of popular, sentimental rhyming couplets, Harper demonstrates a sophisticated pedagogic strategy. The same advocacy for women’s suffrage aimed at respectable women readers who peeked into Jenny and Aunty’s parlor is here repackaged for men’s consideration. Doubtless noticed by women as well, the all-male scene described works to make a kind of male feminism thinkable for readers of the New York *Freeman*. Harper introduces skeptical men to Jacob, a reasonable man like themselves, who works through his objections logically, receiving rational responses from another reasonable man. By placing her advocacy for women in the mouths of respectable, moderate men, Harper delivers a point of view that might otherwise be disregarded out of hand.

This artful delivery of feminist ideas to black male readers reflected an attention to tact that Harper felt less inclined to offer to her largely white audience at the World’s Congress of Representative Women held in 1893 in the “White City.” The signs and symbols of a new order rooted in American military prowess, capitalist expansion, and white supremacy were drawn together for the spectacle of the World’s Columbian Exhibition in Chicago. “An oasis of fantasy and fable at a time of crisis,” the World’s Fair was nevertheless expansive enough to include even dissenters from this vision of “benevolent American world leadership.” Frederick Douglass and Ida B. Wells published their condemnation of African Americans’ exclusion from the fair, and Frances Harper gave her prescription for the years ahead in an address she titled “Woman’s Political Future.”
Harper draws an important distinction between the commonly held belief that women were “naturally” more virtuous or moral than men, and her own view that women merely exhibited particular strengths in their spiritual discipline and commitment to moral uplift. “Political life in our country has plowed in muddy channels, and needs the infusion of clearer and cleaner waters,” Harper remarked. “I am not sure that women are naturally so much better than men that they will clear the stream by the virtue of their womanhood; it is not through sex but through character that the best influence of women upon the life of the nation must be exerted” (435). Harper would draw a further distinction, however, between white and black Americans. As Nell Irvin Painter has asserted, Harper “refused to separate her sex from her race”:

What we need today is not simply more [women] voters, but better voters. Today there are red-handed men in our republic, who walk unwhipped of justice, who richly deserve to exchange the ballot of the freeman for the wristlets of the felon; brutal and cowardly men, who torture, burn, and lynch their fellow-men ... (434)

Harper was an outspoken opponent of lynch law like her younger contemporary Ida B. Wells, and was sure to address this ongoing injustice in her speech, even to a largely white female audience. For Harper, unjust limitations on the citizenship of women and of African Americans were variations on a common theme. Despite the heinous practices she described, however, her faith in American women’s capacity to effect change did not wane:

Great evils stare us in the face that need to be throttled by the combined power of an upright manhood and an enlightened womanhood: and I know that no nation can gain its full measure of enlightenment and happiness if one-half of it is free and the other half is fettered. China compressed the feet of her women and thereby retarded the steps of her men. The elements of a nation’s weakness must ever be found at the hearthstone. (436)

252 Harper was friends with both the radical anti-lynching activist Wells and the conservative, sometimes racist white leader of the Women’s Christian Temperance Union, Frances Willard.
Harper's invocation of “the hearthstone,” that intimate, domestic center of home and family, draws her audience in to her nuanced plan for the nation's future. It is not an asexual “citizen” she calls upon, but “upright” men and “enlightened” women who will guide the United States to its exceptional destiny. The need for women—good “republican mothers”—to influence their husbands and raise children of good character was paramount to Harper. "More than the changing of institutions," she argued, “we need the development of a national conscience, and the upbuilding of national character.” Women had a special role to play, for “it is the women of a country who help to mold its character, and to influence if not determine its destiny” (434).

But it was not just the household or even the nation that would benefit from such development of character; in the spirit of her imperial times, Harper appealed to the role the United States could play in showing virtue to the benighted peoples of the world:

> In the political future of our nation woman will not have done what she could if she does not endeavor to have our republic stand foremost among the nations of the earth, wearing sobriety as a crown and righteousness as a garment and a girdle. (434)

The United States was uniquely capable of achieving righteous character, Harper contested; America was exceptional.\(^{253}\)

By 1900, when the U.S. invasions of Hawai‘i, Cuba and the Philippines had all proceeded to the delight of industrialists, Harper began to prophesy Christ’s victory over sin and depravity in the world. In “The Present Age,” Harper describes the convergence of the earth's population around the ideals of Christ—and American progress.\(^{254}\)

> Say not the age is hard and cold / I think it brave and grand
> When men of diverse sects and creeds / Are clasping hand in hand …

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\(^{253}\) Harper, “Woman’s Political Future.”
The meek eyed sons of far Cathay / Are welcome round the board
Not greed nor malice drives away / These children of our Lord (6)

While Harper’s paternalistic tone here might be attributed to the broader paternalism of Christianity and not only to American exceptionalism, it is clear that the United States is at the center of this image, hosting “meek eyed” Filipinos at a table set by people of a higher order. The mass immigration of Jews to the United States in the 1880s and 1890s is noted with messianic paternalism:

And Judah from whose trusted hands / Came oracles divine
Now sits with those around whose heart [sic] / The light of God doth shine (6)

The benevolent impact of American Christianity could be seen in the lives of Native Americans, as well, whose best lands and sovereignty had been stolen by the U.S. government by 1900, typically with the help of African American troops.255 Indians are figured as wild children, though Harper does not directly invoke the common term “savage”:

The Indian child from forests wild / Has learned to read and pray
The tomahawk and scalping knife / From him have passed away (7)

African Americans receive a different treatment in this litany of progress, however. “The Negro” is depicted as a grown human, a builder, and always already a Christian.

From centuries of servile toil / The Negro finds release
And builds the fanes of prayer and praise / Unto the God of Peace (7)

The Jew “sits with” and learns from “the light” of American Christians; the Indian child’s tomahawk and scalping knife “from him have passed away,” thanks to the civilizing force of America; “the Negro,” however, is “the light,” a civilizing power that drives “the age” toward God and toward the peace that only civilized humanity can realize. Where lesser races have

much yet to gain by their exposure to America, African Americans have finally found “release” from the bonds that prevented their full expression of civilization. White Americans’ whiteness is notably invisible in the poem; perhaps Harper elides the dominant group to keep the focus on black Americans’ contributions to civilization. Or perhaps the white imperialists of the United States are simply understood to be allies of Harper’s mode of black nationalism?

To dissenters, to those “men grown faithless” (8) that this American/Christian vision is in fact leading humanity down a benevolent path, Harper counsels

Blame not the age nor think it full / Of evil and unrest
But say of every other age / This one shall be the best
The age to brighten every path/ By sin and sorrow trod
For loving hearts to usher in / The commonwealth of God (9)

Harper’s “commonwealth” is ambiguous in its location and temporality. Does she believe that the United States of America is, or could be, God’s own commonwealth, unique in the world? Or is she speaking strictly metaphorically of a (democratic?) Kingdom of God? The arrival of God’s thousand-year reign on earth was a vital component of Harper’s theology; that millennialist belief may help to explain her cultural imperialism, if not outright support for military conquest.256

Harper’s poetry must be understood in the context of her millennialist expectation that Christ’s return was not only imminent, but also dependent on his followers’ ability to prepare the world for his arrival. Millennialism in fact “offered a common language for imperialists, robber barons, Klansmen, and African American feminist reformers,” all of whom claimed the world’s destiny lie in the hands of America. Harper’s millennial hopes

were unique in this motley crew, however, in that her words suggest she drew a sharp distinction between the idealized nation and the state that fumbled so frequently in its pursuit of those ideals. While U.S. troops occupied Cuba, Harper read these lines before a meeting of the Universal Peace Union:

Do not cheer until the nation / Shall more wise and thoughtful grow
Than to staunch a stream of sorrow / by an avalanche of woe.
Do not cheer until each nation / Sheathes the sword and blunts the spear,
And we sing aloud for gladness: / Lo, the reign of Christ is here ...

While America might be the vessel into which God poured His hope for the future, there was still much perfecting to be done before Harper could “sing aloud for gladness.”

While Harper’s hope for what might grow from an era of enlightened womanhood preserved her faith in the American nation, if not the state, a remark from Harper’s friend and contemporary Anna Julia Cooper demonstrates that some African American women had less faith in their country’s ability to use its privilege for the good. In reply to an imperialist screed published by a white male, Cooper demanded:

Whence came this apotheosis of greed and cruelty? Whence this sneaking admiration we all have for bullies and prize-fighters? Whence the self-congratulation of ‘dominant’ races, as if ‘dominant’ meant ‘righteous’ and carried with it a title to inherit the earth? Whence the scorn of so-called weak or unwarlike races and individuals, and the very comfortable assurance that it is their manifest destiny to be wiped out as vermin before this advancing civilization?

Cooper linked the “internal colonization” of slavery and then sharecropping to the same American ethos that consciented “external colonization” of far-flung Pacific and Caribbean territories. “By linking imperialism to internal colonization,” Cooper “provided black women intellectuals with the basis for an analysis of how patriarchal power establishes and sustains gendered and racialized social formations,” wrote historian Hazel V. Carby.

258 Anna Julia Cooper, A Voice from the South; By a Black Woman of the South (Xenia, Ohio, 1892), 51.
For Cooper, empire was American slavery on a larger scale. To Harper, empire had the potential to bring the light of freedom to all oppressed peoples. Perhaps these are two sides of the same coin. Here, at the intersection of gender and race, is the unique vantage point from which African American women negotiated life as doubly oppressed people inside the borders of an imperial power.  

Harper’s perspective, nuanced though it was, fit better with white Americans’ dominant worldview in this era than did Cooper’s; indeed, even “anti-imperialist African Americans could and did advocate imperialist roles for themselves” when the goal was racial uplift. Advocates of West African colonization were quite comfortable with the Christian nationalism expressed by Harper and Smith, though these attitudes began to shift in the early twentieth century. Harper’s investment in the American project had its hope in the view that the nation was on an upward trajectory, even as white injustices toward black people persisted. It is from this starting point that women like Harper and Smith expressed their views on American imperialism. “At once separate and allied with black men in the struggle for racial advancement while separate and allied with white women in the struggle for gender equality,” black women produced their own discourse of hope for the future and critique of the present. This mode of black feminist nationalism, in which American nationalism is tempered and shaped by commitments to both racial and gender justice, is a unique contribution to American thought. Its logic was a production of women who refused the modes of thinking made available to them by men and by white women, embracing the

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259 Hazel V. Carby, “‘On the Threshold of Woman’s Era’: Lynching, Empire, and Sexuality in Black Feminist Theory,” *Critical Inquiry* 12, No. 1 (Autumn 1985): 267, 270. Carby asserts that “both Harper and Cooper associated imperialism with unrestrained patriarchal power,” portraying “white male rule as bestial in its actual and potential power to devour lands and people” (265). Indeed, Harper would not have used the term “imperialist” in any positive light; I argue that the upshot of her Christian nationalist ideology was, if not patriarchal, hierarchical, and in that sense a novel expression of imperialism.
priorities of family, Christian virtue, and social justice simultaneously in their own “black woman’s burden.”

While Harper’s millennialist, black feminist nationalism was indeed “imperialist” in its American exceptionalism and its ranking of whole people groups according to national origin and religion, when compared to other expressions of imperialism in the late-nineteenth century it has some qualities to recommend it. In addition to its relative humaneness, Harper’s ideology reflected a broader point; black women’s political activism was not limited to a defensive posture, merely fending off the bold and brash racism of white political actors. Nor was it a delicate supporting role for the “real” work undertaken by black men. Harper, Smith, Cooper, Ida B. Wells-Barnett, Mary Church Terrell and so

260 Michele Mitchell’s work on the politics of racial uplift in the late nineteenth century is the fullest consideration of black imperialism in this period, though her argument that black colonialism was “primarily gendered as a struggle over manhood” downplays the influence of women thinkers. While acknowledging that black women were “not altogether silent on imperialism,” Mitchell concludes that women “focused their energies on moral rehabilitation, the sexual politics of respectability, club work, and antilynching activism during this period.” I argue that Harper’s advocacy for (Christian) imperialism was a vital contribution to the black feminist intellectual tradition, informing reform and domestic justice work. Mitchell, *Righteous Propagation: African Americans and the Politics of Racial Destiny After Reconstruction* (Chapel Hill: UNC Press, 2004), 70, 56. In her study of the women’s movement inside the black Baptist church in this era, Evelyn Brooks Higgenbotham describes the multifaceted points of view of African American women: “Black women found themselves in the unique position of being at once separate and allied with black men in the struggle for racial advancement while separate and allied with white women in the struggle for gender equality.” Higgenbotham, *Righteous Discontent: The Women’s Movement in the Black Baptist Church, 1880-1920* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1993), 80. The twist on Rudyard Kipling’s famous poem title is not a new formulation; the phrase appeared almost immediately after Kipling’s work became well known, as early as 1904 in a poem by black male poet and activist D. Webster Davis in recognition of the difficult physical labors undertaken by black women. *Voice of the Negro, Vol. I, 1904* (Westport, CT: Negro Universities Press, 1969), 266.

261 The white supremacy of American imperialism in the Wars of 1898 has been much studied, but black male civilizationist rhetoric of the era contained more blatant appeals to human hierarchies than did Harper’s language. Pastor Alexander Crummell “explained that Christianizing Africa meant bringing ‘civilization’ to the ‘naked pagan’ so that this ‘crude, undeveloped and benighted child,’ … could be a better ‘head of a family’ and ‘member of the community in which he lives.’” Andrew Zimmerman characterizes such discourse as representative of the Pan-Africanist belief that “American blacks constituted a global elite that could raise up Africans, rather than a politically and economically subordinate caste confined to the United States.” I argue that Harper represents a related view that was rooted in her experience as a black woman. Zimmerman, *Alabama in Africa: Booker T. Washington, the German Empire, and the Globalization of the New South* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2010), 62-63.
many other black women, North and South, imagined a nation that would recognize their full capacity for citizenship, not in spite of their race and gender, but because of them. From this hope came their strength for “lifting as we climb”—passing on privileges and opportunities to the next generation of black women—though barriers would often slow their progress.262

Deeper examination of Gilded Age and Progressive era black feminist thought can not only bring to light an under-studied component of this period in U.S. history; it can also broaden our understanding of both imperialism and the African American freedom struggle writ large. Following the logic of today’s black feminist scholars, a more deliberately intersectional evaluation of imperialism might help to explain why certain contemporary Americans bristle at the suggestion that the freedom-loving United States could ever have been (or might still be) an “empire.” It might suggest ways of building solidarity between marginalized Americans today and oppressed peoples throughout the world living in the economic “colonies” of neoliberal capitalist globalization. Perhaps most importantly, the study of African American women who promoted a nation that could celebrate its own hopefulness without eliminating the hopes of others may provide vital instruction to the modern United States.

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262 “Lifting as we climb” was the motto of the National Association of Colored Women’s Clubs, the social improvement organization founded in 1896 by, among others, the women named here. Higginbotham has problematized the notion of the universal black sisterhood imagined by these founders, whose attitudes toward poor black people, particularly southerners, were often patronizing. I do not mean to ignore her critique here; rather, I intend to draw attention to black feminist thought in the history of imperialism. Evelyn Brooks Higginbotham, “African American Women’s History and the Metalinguage of Race,” Signs 17, No. 2 (Winter 1992): 271.
Black women’s traditions of care and the urgent need for protection and social services in their communities led to the creation of a black female-led infrastructure for activism. Fannie Barrier Williams cited “the organized anxiety of women who have become intelligent enough to recognize their own low social condition and strong enough to initiate the forces of reform” as the reason for the rise of the black clubwomen’s movement. No longer housed exclusively inside male-headed churches, black women’s activities extended in the 1880s and 1890s to the establishment of neighborhood clubs and civic organizations, all designed to further the work of justice and equality for black people. Well-known women recognized the need for a nation-wide body that could both reflect and guide the local and regional movements, and offer aid to smaller, more remote communities, and in 1896, the National Association of Colored Women was established with more than 5,000 members. Within thirty years the organization had grown to include more than a thousand local clubs and over 100,000 members.263

The many homegrown chapters of the NACW engaged in much the same work that local groups of African American women had been doing for more than a century. Just as Rebecca Cole’s sisters and the Ladies Union Association had nursed wounded Civil War veterans back to health, their granddaughters’ generation met the need for healthcare in a society that was violent and dangerous for many black people. Dr. Caroline Still Anderson, among the first generation of black female physicians in the country, established a medical

263 Stephanie J. Shaw argued that it was “the internal traditions of the African-American community rather than activities in the white community” that led to the creation of the National Association of Colored Women, as opposed to some simplistic “imitation” of upper class white women’s activities of the era. Stephanie J. Shaw, “Black Club Women and the Creation of the National Association of Colored Women,” Journal of Women’s History 3, No. 2 (Fall 1991): 11. Salem, To Better Our World, 11. “National Association of Colored Women,” Encyclopedia of African-American Culture and History: The Black Experience in the Americas, 2nd ed. (Detroit, Mich: Macmillan Reference USA), 1601.
dispensary for African Americans in Philadelphia with the support of the women of the Berean Church. Similar ventures, including the establishment of full-service hospitals, were undertaken by black clubwomen in Indianapolis, St. Louis, and throughout the South. When world war engulfed Americans in 1917, the women of the NACW “transferred their talents as fund-raisers to war work,” generating millions of dollars for the Liberty Loan campaigns and the Red Cross. Women served as “canteen workers, organizers, entertainers, fund-raisers, and supervisors” with the YWCA, the War Camp Community Service, and other local military support efforts.\textsuperscript{264}

Gertrude Bustill Mossell led efforts to provide patients with clean linens and extra food at Philadelphia’s Frederick Douglass Hospital, founded by her surgeon husband in 1895. But Mossell’s most lasting contributions were to the field of journalism, as Women’s Editor of the \textit{New York Age} and the Indianapolis \textit{World} in the 1880s and 1890s. Like her great-aunt, abolitionist and teacher Grace Bustill Douglass, Mossell advocated education for black girls, having benefited so richly from her attendance at the Institute for Colored Youth, like Rebecca Cole and Caroline LeCount before her. After many years as a writer, she worked for women’s suffrage at the turn of the century, when “most black clubwomen considered it a subordinate interest.” Her famous nephew, Paul Bustill Robeson, would go on to inspire a later generation of radical activists.\textsuperscript{265}

NACW co-founder Mary Church Terrell ranked prison reform among the most important issues that the Association should address, efforts that might help young women


\textsuperscript{265} Salem, \textit{To Better Our World}, 73-75, 39.
in the 1890s in ways that young Mary Ash had not been twenty years earlier. “Abuse of vagrancy laws, the convict lease system, and peonage” were among “the increasing threats to black life and security” that Terrell witnessed—and that the reach of a national movement of women might begin to tackle. Terrell’s fellow activist and friend Ida B. Wells Barnett brought lynching to the public eye through publications and speaking tours that clubwomen throughout the country promoted and attended.²⁶⁶

Just as Margaret Forten had sacrificed her son to her country “upon the altar of its liberties” to fight the British in 1780, and as Emilie Davis worried for the safety of her schoolmates enlisting with the U.S. Colored Troops, clubwomen offered their husbands, fathers, and sons to later American war efforts. The military service of black men that both Rebecca Cole and Caroline LeCount had expected white Centennial women to honor and respect in the 1870s was similarly complicated for African Americans in the wake of the Wars of 1898 and World War I. Twentieth-century historian Adriane Lentz-Smith argues that “many members of the World War I cohort would begin to shape a sense of nation, rooted in their overseas experiences, that would allow for solidarity with subject people across national borders.” Not unlike Frances Watkins Harper’s vision for a world infused with the spirit of African American Christian women, many veterans of World War I inspired African Americans at home to view their oppressions through a global historical lens. The resurgence of interest among black Americans in colonization in the 1910s and 1920s, along with a growing concern for the lives of Africans and marginalized peoples throughout the world, echoed not only Martin Delaney’s black nationalism of the 1850s,

but the more recent Christian civilizationism of black women intellectuals like Frances Harper.267

The thread connecting the Ladies’ Union Association to the establishment of the National Association of Colored Women and black activism of the twentieth century is both simpler and more important than has been conventionally understood. The work of care for the most vulnerable among them—whether wounded soldiers or abandoned children—linked early twentieth century “race women” to their abolitionist grandmothers. Dr. Rebecca Cole, Caroline LeCount, and Frances Harper demonstrated a commitment to black women’s education throughout their lives—even when it required instructing powerful white women how to properly respect and value black belonging in the American family. Service to the destitute and commitment to the unfulfilled promises of American equality continued, uninterrupted though not without change, from the antebellum era into the twentieth century. The formation of a national structure to facilitate information-sharing, broader intellectual debate, and increased political power was only a more logistically sophisticated iteration of the work performed in church basements, hospital tents, and private parlors in the decades that had come before.

This expansion of the neighborhood organization model was consistent with the broader culture of its time, increasingly fascinated as it was by efficiency, statistical analysis, and the Progressive-era science of reform work. But the fact that both race and sex marginalized black activist women meant that a national voice was especially vital for

Americans silenced by racism and sexism. In a dramatic expansion of the neighborhood-based focus of an effort like Philadelphia’s Home for Colored Children on Girard Avenue, black clubwomen at the turn of the twentieth century “embraced local women with shared traditions and outlooks who were often no longer from the same families, churches, neighborhoods, or even regions.” Shifting urban demographics and the steady migration of hundreds of thousands of black southerners northward meant that the female-led black benevolent institutions of northern cities were under ever more strain to deliver services to the poor. In that challenge, however, laid the opportunity for national organization and a more vividly imagined black American womanhood.268

268 Shaw, “Black Club Women and the Creation of the National Association of Colored Women,” 19.
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