

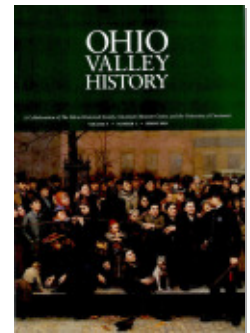


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Louisville Civil Rights Movement

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“The Gateway to the South”: *Regional Identity and the Louisville Civil Rights Movement*

TRACY E. K’MEYER

According to a survey conducted for the Louisville Urban League in 1948, “Most of the traditions of the deep South which apply to race relations are observed in Louisville. On the other hand, many relations between the two races in Louisville are similar to those found in northern cities.” White commentators considered Louisville “exceptional among southern cities in its community efforts to solve racial problems.” In contrast, black editorialists argued that Louisville lagged behind Cincinnati and Springfield, Ohio; Cairo, Illinois; and Washington, D.C., and argued that the “self-styled ‘gateway to the South’ is morally obligated to make even greater progress to justify its leadership claims.”¹ In both cases, Louisvillians employed regional symbols that were codes for the state of race relations. For most of the civil rights era, references to the deep South or specific cities such as Birmingham served as code for extreme segregation and degraded race relations, while references to midwestern or northern cities represented less rigid racial rules and relative progress in civil rights. Through the use of such geographic references Louisvillians constructed a regional identity that reflected different, and changing, assessments of the nature of race relations in the city. This essay will demonstrate first how civil rights advocates and those who resisted, black and white, used rhetoric about Louisville’s regional identity to make their case in battles over change in the racial status quo. This rhetorical struggle informed the tone of the movement and helped to create the possibility of progress. Second, this essay will argue that, over the course of the civil rights era, the reconstruction of Louisville’s identity reflected changing national



Louisville waterfront and Clark Memorial Bridge depicted in “Gateway to the South” by William Kent Hagerman, ca. 1956. The Filson Historical Society

perceptions of regional race relations, suggesting a new way of understanding the north/south dichotomy depicted in movement scholarship.

At the end of World War II, Louisville remained a segregated border city, but one that had begun to experience the economic, political, and social changes that would reshape its race relations. According to the 1950 census, since the start of the war, the city's population had grown by nearly sixteen percent to 369,000, of whom 15.7 percent had been classified by census officials as “non-white.” That population was becoming increasingly segregated following white flight to the suburbs that began in the 1930s and accelerated in the 1950s. As a result, African Americans became concentrated in the oldest and most crowded sections of the city's west end. The population growth resulted in part from an expansion of war-time defense industries that drew workers to the city, a resurrection in the local economy that began in Louisville's chemical, plastics,

and munitions factories. This expansion continued after the war so that, by 1950, thirty-one percent of the population worked in manufacturing. African Americans, however, did not share equitably in the new jobs. A study by two social scientists at the University of Louisville showed that in 1950 sixty-two percent of white men worked in white collar, skilled or supervisory positions while the same percentage of black men labored in service jobs or unskilled positions.² Hence, these manufacturing plants helped shape not only the city's economic growth but, indirectly, its racial climate.



Charles Farnsley, mayor of Louisville 1948-1953. The Filson Historical Society

From the 1930s through the 1950s, the political climate in Louisville changed dramatically as well. As in most southern cities, the Democratic party had dominated Louisville politics since the turn of the century. Unlike its southern neighbors, however, the city had an active Republican party that could muster enough votes to actually elect candidates on occasion and thereby challenge the status quo.

Moreover, in the war years and afterward, Louisville received national media attention for its forward-thinking, progressive Democratic mayors, particularly Wilson Wyatt and Charles Farnsley. Most important, Louisville's African Americans had, since the 1870s, had access to the vote and in the wake of World War II, a number of factors increased the impact of their political participation. Although they made up just under twenty percent of the voting population, residential segregation concentrated African Americans into a small number of wards and districts, enabling them to elect black aldermen and state representatives on a regular basis. Another factor, much noted in the press, that produced political clout for African Americans in Louisville was the mobility of black voters between political parties. Historically the majority of Louisville's black voters had supported Republicans,

but after the New Deal they voted for Roosevelt and the Democratic Party in national elections while continuing to support Republicans at the city level. By 1956, the shift in party allegiances had created a split in black registered voters—47.7 percent Republican and 47.1 percent Democrat. As a result, African Americans became a swing constituency in Louisville, forcing each party to work hard to keep their loyalists and to recruit from the other side, thus creating a political dynamic in which African Americans could bring considerable pressure to bear when they sought change.³

As a border city, Louisville combined characteristics of the South, North, and Midwest. In its patterns of segregation, however, Louisville remained decidedly southern. Black residents had access only to separate and unequal parks, schools, and hospitals, and local ordinances restricted their patronage in downtown restaurants, theaters, and stores. Moreover, although Kentuckians had been divided during the Civil War, after Reconstruction white residents, including those in the state's leading city, identified with their southern neighbors, memorializing the Confederacy and honoring it with monuments. Other factors, however, gave Louisville a northern or midwestern character. The city was home to a broad ethnic and religious mix, including relatively large Catholic and Jewish populations, with both groups providing leaders and rank-and-file participants for the civil rights movement. Moreover, because outside corporations owned and managed all but nine of the thirty-five largest plants in the urban area, the economic expansion brought with it the influence of northern and national leaders. Decisions made in national headquarters guided even unions in the largest Louisville plants. Finally, in contrast to the most of the South, which in the postwar years recommitted itself to subverting the Fifteenth Amendment's protection of black suffrage, in Louisville no organized effort arose to overturn the black vote.⁴

The protection of the black right to vote contributed to Louisville's self-image and national reputation as a southern place that, because of certain northern characteristics, differed from its region in many laudable aspects. Commentators described the city as "a middle ground" with a "mélange of northern and southern attitudes" which, while being southern in its "approach to the Negro," had a political culture and "relations between the two races...similar to those found in northern communities."⁵ Such language reflects the use of regional codes. The "southern approach to the Negro" meant a system of Jim Crow segregation and discrimination, while observers assumed as northern traits the city's relatively better race relations and black suffrage. These lat-



Wilson Wyatt, mayor of Louisville 1941-1945, sworn in on December 1, 1941. The Filson Historical Society

ter traits rendered Louisville, although still a southern city, a unique one. For example, Mark Ethridge, general manager of the city’s main daily papers from 1936 to 1963, wrote to a colleague, “I believe the Negro gets a better break in Louisville than in any southern city.” Others noted that Louisville had “done better than any other city in the South” in its efforts to improve race relations, and as a result, one could find “more democracy” there than in the rest of the region.⁶ Indeed, throughout the movement years local media, activists, and officials circulated by word of mouth and in print as many expressions of pride in Louisville’s “tradition of freedom” and its “reputation in race relations”—which the *Courier Journal* described as “almost utopian”—as they did to Louisville leading the South.⁷

The roots of these perceptions can be found in a series of events beginning in 1870 and 1871, when local African Americans successfully protested segregation policies on the city’s public transportation. Later, in 1931, after several years of pressure, black political leaders convinced the city to establish Louisville Municipal College.⁸ During World War II, Mayor Wilson Wyatt ensured black participation on draft boards and rationing boards, the housing commission, and his legislative committee, earning him a reputation for liberality.⁹ And in the decade after the war the city’s libraries integrated, a biracial movement forced the opening of public hospitals, and in 1951 the University of Louisville admitted its first African American students.¹⁰ Each advance resulted from black pressure with sporadic assistance by white liberal allies. In each case, black leaders argued that, as taxpayers, African Americans deserved access to these government-owned or operated facilities. Black and white activists would repeat these successes and, in turn, would use them for different goals in debates over further advances throughout the civil rights era.

Despite the prevalence of Louisville’s progressive image, black leaders and white liberals during and since the civil rights movement have taken exception to this picture. Some charge that Louisville’s progressive reputation served to quiet black complaints. Lyman Johnson, for example, recalled that “white leaders would say, ‘Look how good we are to you. Now, don’t bug us too much.’” White activist Ira Grupper also argues that the city’s reputation was used to co-opt black leaders, giving minor concessions such as positions on city boards or integrated libraries that were not available in deep South cities.¹¹ Others believe that Louisville’s self-image allowed its citizens to deny the extent of racial problems while being “soothed” into believing they were actively addressing them.¹² Often these critiques of Louisville’s purported good race relations used references to the deep South—in particular its extreme segregation—to undercut the image. Lyman Johnson remarked that white leaders expected Louisville’s black residents to be happy that they were not in Atlanta or Birmingham. J.C. Olden, in a column published in a local black paper in

1953, argued that Louisville should not become too self-satisfied because, in some ways, “Mississippi attitudes” were prevalent. Indeed, the local NAACP warned that beneath the city’s proudly liberal demeanor, “There are many undercover Bilbos and Talmadges in Louisville.”¹³

The conflicted nature of Louisville’s identity—southern, leading southern, border, or perhaps something else—manifested itself in debates over the meaning of civil rights advances between 1945 and 1975. While white civic leaders, for the most part conservative or moderate, described Louisville as a border city that was ahead of and better than the rest of its natural region, the South, black civil rights activists and their white allies consistently challenged that image. As early as 1947, black leaders began to argue that residents should not consider Louisville as the leader of the South’s race relations. In that year, they campaigned to desegregate parks and recreational facilities; in this effort, black leaders used two rhetorical strategies. First, they disputed Louisville’s progressive image. Indeed, the editor of the *Defender* argued that in order for the city to maintain its leadership position in the South the local baseball team needed to integrate its facilities in order to stop “disgracing” the community.¹⁴ Second and more interestingly, black leaders tried to recast Louisville’s identity by categorizing it as a midwestern city, along with St. Louis, Indianapolis, and Cincinnati.¹⁵ In regional racial code, the Midwest was a transitional place and more advanced in race relations than the South. By claiming that Louisville was more midwestern than southern, black leaders believed that its residents would measure its progress against the former region’s standards and the obviously poor comparison would goad white leaders to work harder to justify its progressive image. Such emulation would thus improve civil rights more rapidly.

White city officials declined to do so, falling back upon its southern identification. According to a newspaper report, City Law Director Gilbert Burnett refused to integrate the public parks because, “Louisville had the best race relations of any large city and [he] intended to keep the situation that way.”¹⁶ Furthermore, the city’s mayor E. Leland Taylor argued that integrating the parks would cause racial confrontations. Angry black spokesmen responded that there had been no such trouble in Cincinnati or St. Louis and charged that the mayor had made white Louisvillians look like the “hoodlums of South Carolina, Georgia, and Florida.”¹⁷ In other words, black leaders argued that Louisvillians were midwesterners who could be expected to accept integration unlike racial bigots from the deep South. In this case, black activists had little success in framing the debate or challenging Louisville to change its regional identity. Only small steps had been taken toward opening public recreational facilities, such as the integration of a park amphitheater, before a Supreme Court decision in 1955 forced city leaders to desegregate the parks. Nevertheless, white Louisvillians maintained that

this slow pattern of progress reflected well on the city and should be a model for the future.¹⁸

The event that cemented Louisville’s self-image and national reputation as a leading southern city was the desegregation of its public schools in September 1956. At the announcement of the *Brown v. Board of Education*, state and city officials expected that Kentucky and Louisville would lead the South toward integration because “Kentucky has had a more liberal attitude toward segregation than most other southern states.” Indeed, the state had “forged to the front in carrying out the Court’s ruling” by already amending parts of the state school segregation law. School officials in Louisville in particular believed that “we would not really have the problems in Louisville that other cities, say in the South would have had—the deep South—because Louisville was a broad-minded city. We had integrated parks, buses, street cars, all those things.” One school principal promised that Louisville “will serve as a pattern for other southern cities.”¹⁹ Believing that Louisville would fulfill its role as the leader for the South, school officials began a two-year process of planning for and implementing school desegregation.

As in the debate over desegregation of the parks, local black leaders tried to urge quick progress by challenging Louisville’s self-construction as a leading southern city. In this case, they compared Louisville to school systems in West Virginia, Missouri, and in Maryland in order to beat the drum for rapid school integration. A month after *Brown*, the *Defender* described the progress in Baltimore, like Louisville a border city described as similarly “torn between northern and southern practices,” and asserted that West Virginia had surpassed Louisville and thus threatened the latter’s reputation. African American publisher Frank Stanley pointedly argued that, compared to these other places, “Louisville, the self-styled number-one-liberal-city of the South is lagging behind.” Later, NAACP president George Cordery issued a challenge, “Certainly the citizens of Baltimore are not more enlightened than those of Louisville.”²⁰ On the occasion of Cordery’s remark, the NAACP, hoping to force the city to prove itself the most enlightened place in the region, submitted a petition calling for immediate school integration in the fall of 1955. School officials responded with a plan and a promise for integrating one year later.

With school integration defined as a southern problem, Louisville received lavish praise for being a southern city that could lead the region toward a solution to its racial problems. On September 4, 1956, Louisville’s public schools integrated with minimal public opposition. The integration plan assigned students to schools by district, and provided a “safety valve” in the form of a transfer option for students who did not want to attend a school in which they were a minority. In contrast to the mob scenes and violence that attended school integration elsewhere, in Louisville five lonely picketers paced in front of the Board of Education office. The story of this “peaceful

integration” made a splash in the national media and earned the city and its officials national and even international praise. Benjamin Fine, wrote in the *New York Times*, “When the history of this proud southern city is written, this day will undoubtedly go down as a historic landmark.... Even in the South, it was shown here, integration can be made to work without violence.”²¹ National magazines picked up the story and, in articles titled “The Quiet Zone,” “How to Integrate,” “The Quiet Way,” and “It Works in Louisville” described how Louisville’s acting school superintendent, Omer Carmichael (a native of Alabama), had led the city to integrate without the confrontation that plagued other locales.²² Superintendent Omer Carmichael soon received a White House invitation as well as a number of honorary degrees. The National NAACP gave its Kentucky branch an award and the U.S. Information Agency and National Broadcasting Corporation collaborated on a film about the Louisville story for distribution in Europe, Asia, and Africa. Indeed, the Assistant Director of the South African Institute of Race Relations viewed Louisville as a model for desegregation.²³



Through the din of celebration, a few voices questioned the extent and meaning of Louisville’s integration of its schools. In her 1956 report on the situation, Anne Braden wrote that while Louisville was the “first major southern city to begin desegregation...that does not mean that there is not much bitter anti-integration feeling among sections of the white population.” In fact, she concluded, pressure from black and white liberal activists, not conservatives, had prevented school officials from taking five years to integrate. Similarly, James Crumlin, president of the state NAACP, called Louisville’s integration “token.” But critics of Louisville’s school integration plans and actions reserved their strongest criticism for the city’s failure to integrate teachers, a cause the *Defender* took up and championed for years. The paper pointed out in September 1958, for example, that teacher integration in Louisville lagged behind Detroit as well as Missouri, West Virginia, Ohio, and interestingly, Washington state. Once more, black commentators used northern and midwestern cities as the yardstick to measure progress. But these criticisms failed to dent the generally positive reputation the city had gained locally and nationally, nor did they challenge its identity, now even more firmly cemented, as a leading southern city. Indeed, in 1959, when the school board finally did integrate faculties, an editorial in the *Defender* admitted that now “Louisville

From left to right: Earle Pruitt, Beecher Terrace Housing Project Manager; Frederick K. Bollman, Project Manager for the Economic Cooperation Administration; Mayor Charles Farnsley; P.A.M. Mellbye, Interpreter. Picture taken at Beecher Terrace on the occasion of the visit of Norwegian architects, engineers and builders to Louisville under the sponsorship of E.C.A. for an inspection tour of public housing on Monday, October 15, 1951. The Filson Historical Society

will further deserve its title of the ‘South’s most desegregated city.’”²⁴

Even before school integration, black leaders in Louisville warned against complacency and satisfaction with Louisville’s progress, calling for the city to take the next step by integrating public accommodations, and using midwestern cities as a model. As early as March 1954, staff writers for the *Defender* warned that “we are not in the position to boast.” Despite some progress discrimination still existed in jobs and facilities and, most damning, a “deep southern feeling is still in the hearts of many Kentuckians.” The challenge, the *Defender* editorialized, was to beat back complacency and move “full steam ahead” or risk being bypassed by the deep South.²⁵ Specifically, Louisvillians needed to follow the model of African Americans in Kansas City, St. Louis, Chicago, and other midwestern cities and fight for a law against public accommodation discrimination.

Throughout the multi-year campaign for open accommodations African American leaders employed rhetorical strategies that built upon those earlier employed. The first was familiar: to cast Louisville as a lagging midwestern city instead of a leading southern one. In March 1954 Frank Stanley launched this effort by pointing out that “unlike Ohio, Illinois, and Indiana,” Louisville had no civil rights law. He continued, “It is time for Louisville to cover up its southern exposure and look to the North, East, and West for the best example of how to protect the rights of all its citizens.” Later, at the height of demonstrations held downtown, the *Defender* reiterated this theme, saying that “Louisville cannot be an exception to the pattern of border, northern, and western cities.”²⁶ More specifically, Louisville activists referred to events in Kansas City and St. Louis to prod local blacks out of their complacency, criticizing the community for riding its post-school integration laurels while “in Kansas City an aroused citizenry is marching in zero [degree] weather in protest of bias.”²⁷ And later, after the movement for desegregating public accommodations had gained steam among local black residents, the comparison was employed to urge white officials to follow those examples and desegregate. Stanley justified the models by saying that the two cities “are identical to Louisville in civil rights privileges.” And, at the height of the movement, the steering committee leading the demonstrations compared progress in the cities by stating, “Our expectation of desegregation in Louisville is not unrealistic when you consider that in a three week period St. Louis desegregated 200 downtown restaurants, Kansas City 121 But here in Louisville, working on the problem for seven weeks, only 10 restaurants have integrated.”²⁸

To some extent black leaders were successful in casting St. Louis as the appropriate model for Louisville. In April 1961, Mayor Bruce Hoblitzell announced he would take a delegation to Missouri to discuss with city leaders how they had managed desegregation. The meeting, however, did not go as

civil rights leaders had hoped. One member of the delegation—the owner of one of the targets of the demonstrations—called the move a publicity stunt. And the mayor made a public statement saying that he believed Louisville had already “gone further in desegregation than any other city, including St. Louis.”²⁹ Nevertheless, the *Courier Journal* pointed out that Hoblitzell’s plan for testing the extent of segregation in downtown shops mirrored one that had worked in the sister city.³⁰ Whether Louisville officials were willing to admit it or not, they were following midwestern models.

A second strategy employed the specter of the deep South as a challenge to Louisville’s identity. At first, these references were used to shame Louisville businessmen into taking action. Early in the *Defender’s* effort to raise the issue of segregation in public facilities, reporters pointed out that “even in the worst of the South” theater owners admitted black patrons, albeit with separate seating. Staff writer Clarence Mathews challenged theater owners by asking, “Can it be that local theater owners are more shallow than those of the deep South?”³¹ Once the sit-in demonstrations in the deep South began to have an effect, this unfavorable comparison became a call for action. In June 1960, the Reverend C. Ewbank Tucker asserted that Louisville was “lagging behind many cities in the deep South.” A year later, during the sit-in campaign in downtown Louisville, black leaders argued that because Atlanta was planning to desegregate by September, there could be no reason that Louisville “in light of its past and present atmosphere of good relations” should not desegregate immediately.³²

When the official reaction to sit-in demonstrations hardened, civil rights activists became frustrated and adopted a more accusatory tone, characterizing Louisville as no better than the worst of its southern neighbors. In June 1961, Juvenile Court Judge Henry Triplett established his own “behavioral code” for young people who participated in demonstrations. Those who violated this code risked detention, as did adults for contributing to the delinquency of minors by failing to enforce the code. Neither aspect of the code had a basis in local law, but it was used by police anyway. Triplett’s order stirred repeated comparisons to the poster child of deep South racism: Mississippi. Critics charged Triplett himself as being “lower than any judge in Mississippi.” And a year later, when police and theater owners pushed and even attacked demonstrators, the Reverend Tucker, one of the victims, wrote to the mayor that “I had to look three times to tell whether I was in Kentucky or Mississippi.” Meanwhile, a young demonstrator named Paul Duffy told the police they “would make good cops in Mississippi.” Duffy was later detained and given a psychiatric evaluation, a tactic civil rights leaders called the “Mississippi treatment.”³³ Mississippi, like Birmingham, was code for the most extreme form of segregation, and repeated associations between Louisville and its benighted southern cousin challenged

the city’s identity, and the assumptions about progressive racial attitudes that underlay that identity.

Advocates of an open accommodations ordinance also used Louisville’s reputation for racial progressiveness as an argument for quick desegregation. The *Defender* argued that there existed “plenty of evidence that Louisvillians will accept integration,” specifically the “almost perfect near ten year record” of integration in public education. Moreover, a civil rights law would bring public facilities in “step with Louisville’s inherent spirit—tolerance and acceptance.” Martin Luther King, during a visit in April 1961 similarly

invoked the “inspiring example” of school integration and the “good will in your community.”³⁴ In a more challenging vein, black leaders repeatedly accused Louisville of standing still and resting on the laurels of a past record of compliance with integration. They argued that the city’s record lulled whites into a false sense of superiority, blinding them to the problems that remained to be conquered. Moreover, they pointed out when the “over-praised city” was embarrassed by racist slights to black visitors.³⁵ The continuing problems, after a history of progress, endangered Louisville’s good reputation, black leaders argued, as “a southern city with a northern outlook.”³⁶ To preserve its position as a leader for the region, Louisville, and local businessmen in particular, needed to take immediate steps to eradicate segregation in the downtown.³⁷

The threat to Louisville’s reputation did move powerful whites, most notably the publisher and editor of the *Courier Journal* and *Louisville Times*, Barry Bingham and Mark Ethridge, to advocate desegregation. In February 1961,

soon after large scale downtown demonstrations began, an editorial writer for the *Courier Journal* weighed in on the issue. The writer’s primary concern was Louisville’s good name and leadership position in the region that he regarded as a civic asset, one not available to cities such as New Orleans and Little Rock where racial strife over school integration had tarnished reputations. The editorialist pointed out that cities such as Houston and Richmond, which had “a far deeper southern tradition,” had desegregated with a minimum of disturbance. Asserting that “We cannot stand still in the midst of a fast-flowing stream,” the writer called for public facilities to integrate voluntarily. At the same time, however, the editorial writers at the *Courier Journal* frowned on demonstrations or any other disorder that could threaten the city’s reputation. In short, the primary consideration of the two local newspapers was to preserve Louisville’s standing relative to other southern cities, not necessarily to improve conditions for African Americans. In fact, the latter was only a



Bruce Hoblitzell, mayor of Louisville 1957-1961. *The Filson Historical Society*

means to the former. When demonstrations renewed after a halt for negotiations, for example, the *Courier Journal* criticized impatient black leaders and praised those businesses that desegregated without fanfare.³⁸ In doing so, the paper spoke for white moderate business and civic leaders who took pride in their city's record, saw advantages in maintaining it, and willingly supported gradual change to the extent that it reinforced Louisville's identity as a leader in the South.

The response by white officials, specifically the city's mayors and candidates for mayor, during the campaign for an open accommodations law similarly drew on Louisville's reputation. In 1957, when Bruce Hoblitzell ran for the mayor's office and he was asked about a potential public accommodations ordinance, he first asserted his own lack of prejudice. Then he stressed that he did not want to force any particular act of integration for fear of upsetting the progress for which Louisville was famous. Three years later as mayor he adopted the same position. He elaborated in February 1960, claiming that because Louisville had already made "excellent progress in race relations," he believed that "if the accommodation issue was left alone it would 'take care' of itself." During the demonstrations, Hoblitzell maintained that progress did not need to be rushed because Louisville was already "ahead of any comparable city," including St. Louis. The Democratic candidate who sought to become his successor, William Milburn, adopted the same position. In a candidates' debate in February 1961, he said he was "proud of the fact that Louisville is a national model and I hope to God we can keep it that way" but he believed that forced integration would be "disastrous to our steady peaceful progress."³⁹ Civil rights advocates claimed that arguments such as these allowed white conservative leaders to use the city's reputation as a way to slow down racial change.

The attempt to delay change by refusing to adopt a law against discrimination in public accommodations, however, worked only temporarily. In May 1963, after a year and a half of demonstrations, debate, and delay subsequent to the election of a new mayor and Board of Aldermen, the Board passed a city civil rights ordinance, the first of its kind in a southern city and realized a full year before the national law. The ordinance once again raised the city to national prominence and earned it praise as a leader for its region. Chester Morrison, in an article for *Look* magazine entitled "The City That Integrated without Strife," argued that Louisville "has shown how things can be done." Later in the essay, he described a black man in Louisville reading about violence elsewhere, observing "He wasn't in heaven, but he was not in Birmingham." Louisville native Hunter Thompson, writing in *The Reporter*, went further, claiming that, based on the city's progress, "Louisville has integrated itself right out of the South." The highest praise for the city came in 1964 when Louisville won the American Municipal League's All-American

City Award, specifically for passing an open accommodations ordinance, which initiated several years of self-congratulations.⁴⁰

In the wake of the open accommodations movement, local activists continued to press for further steps toward total desegregation, using arguments similar to those that helped get the law passed. The *Defender* editorialized that the gains in which the city took such great pride were in jeopardy and did not suffice to declare victory. Indeed, the writer accused the city of doing “only that which is necessary to keep us from being in the same category as a Mississippi or Alabama.” The problem, the writer argued, lay in the temptation to “measure Louisville and Kentucky progress by what has been achieved in the deep South and not by our neighboring midwestern and sister northern, eastern, or western states.”⁴¹

Immediately after the passage of the open accommodations law, Louisville civil rights leaders began calling for an enforceable open housing ordinance. Open housing activists used arguments that echoed those employed during earlier battles. The West End Community Council, for example, argued that, because Louisville lay “between North and South” it had a unique opportunity to produce a model solution to the problem of segregated housing in both regions. As early as 1963, the *Defender* pointed out that such models already existed. Indeed, “all sections except the South are considering open occupancy laws” and current campaigns for such laws in Illinois, Indiana, and Ohio (by now familiar examples) were underway. Later, during the debate over an open occupancy law, Clarence Matthews reviewed bills in other locations, emphasizing that in St. Louis, a city “located similarly as Louisville,” the law called for jail time and fines.⁴² Playing on fears that demonstrations might harm Louisville’s image, black leaders pleaded with city officials to head them off by approving an open housing ordinance. For example, long-time leader Maurice Rabb begged, “Please don’t send me into the streets. I don’t want to demonstrate. It is not good for Louisville.” Meanwhile Hulbert James asked the mayor to call a meeting on the issue to “save Louisville from the turmoil of demonstrations.”⁴³

Most interesting, open housing advocates changed the regional references for what Louisville should avoid. Since the time of the public accommodations ordinance, national events had changed the atmosphere in which civil rights battles were waged. In particular, the open housing campaign took place in the shadow of the “long hot summers” of riots in northern and western cities. Moreover, a year earlier, demonstrations for open housing in Chicago had led to racial violence. Now, although students and faculty from the University of Louisville issued a statement supporting open housing saying that they did not want to see Louisville become “the next Selma or Birmingham,” black leaders also warned against following the example of “Watts, Hough, or Harlem.” They argued that the key to prevent-

ing violence lay in demonstrating for, and succeeding in, the procurement of an open housing ordinance.⁴⁴ In short, Louisville activists implicitly warned city officials that this border community could be hurt as much by becoming like a northern city as it would one in the deep South.

Another significant change in the debate during the late 1960s over open housing lay in the fact that white civic leaders, pro-civil rights city officials, and the *Courier Journal* adopted many of activists' traditional arguments, albeit in somewhat milder forms. In late 1966, for example, the Housing Committee of the Louisville Human Relations Commission (LHRC) debated whether the city's application for federal money under the model-city program would be accepted if the city failed to enact an open housing ordinance. Thereafter, the *Courier Journal* took up the issue and repeatedly used it to press for a quick passage of the law.⁴⁵ Moreover, the paper emulated the civil rights movement's focus on St. Louis as a model for Louisville in its coverage of the open housing issue, publishing detailed articles about how the former managed to get a strong law.⁴⁶ The *Courier Journal* also warned against actions that would render Louisville a deep South city. Most colorfully, the editorial writers warned that if a law didn't pass and demonstrations resumed, it would make Louisville "look like Zilchville, Alabama or Mississippi."⁴⁷ Similarly, early in 1967, Monsignor Alfred Horrigan, chairman of the city's Human Relations Commission, asserted that Louisville had a liberal reputation and a strong record but needed to pass open housing legislation to maintain that reputation and progress. A few months later, as controversy over the issue increased, black alderwoman Louise Reynolds expressed her fear that "Louisville stands in danger of losing her good image" by opposition and failure to act. The *Courier Journal's* editorial writer went further saying that "delay can only make it more difficult still for Louisville to hold its reputation as a city of calm, reasoned progress." Indeed, the city's preeminent daily paper essentially mimicked the *Defender's* earlier position when it argued that "it does no good to recite the litany of progress" from the past.⁴⁸ The city must take the next step in civil rights.

Ironically, the Board of Aldermen did just what the *Courier Journal* warned against; it relied on Louisville's past record of progress as an excuse for voting down the proposed open housing ordinance in the spring of 1967. In justifying the vote, the aldermen expressed pride that Louisville was the first southern city to pass a civil rights law, arguing that "Our Negro community is better housed and better employed than any city of comparable size." Their decision to disapprove the housing ordinance, they asserted, had resulted from disorders and demonstrations and they maintained that they would not approve such an ordinance as long as outside extremists were present in the community.⁴⁹ The *Courier Journal* immediately attacked the decision, calling it disingenuous for the aldermen to cite Louisville's past progress and yet refuse to take the next

step. Moreover, their antagonism toward outsiders resembled the "xenophobia" of "Ku Kluxers and other civil rights opponents in the most backward areas of the deep South."⁵⁰ Meanwhile, open housing advocates pledged to keep up their work, threatening to demonstrate during Derby Week and stepping up the campaign to get Louisville's model city application denied.⁵¹ In the end, a concerted political campaign installed a new mayor and a new Board of Aldermen that within a month passed an open housing law.

The passage of the open housing law, however, came too late to save Louisville's reputation as a leader for the South. The national media had already decided the pedestal was broken. The main source of criticism of the city focused not on failure to approve the law but rather on the city's reaction to demonstrators at the height of the campaign. *Newsweek* described "mobs of snarling white youths" who surrounded open housing marchers and pelted them "with curses, racial slurs, rocks, eggs, tomatoes and firecrackers" and police "armed with hard hats, 3-foot riot staves, tear gas and yellow smoke bombs" who stopped the confrontation by arresting the demonstrators. This scene, *Newsweek* contended, was "the year's ugliest racial confrontation."⁵² Lawrence Grauman, Jr., writing for *The Nation*, invoked deep South associations when he likened the opposition to open housing in Louisville to "the Snopses," Faulkner's benighted Mississippians.⁵³

The most common image in the national media's coverage of the open housing campaign in Louisville was that the city had betrayed its record of racial progress. In an article written during Derby season, the *Christian Century* recalled Louisville's peaceful acceptance of school integration and open accommodations, but said that in "the third leg of the triple crown . . . Good Steed Louisville turned out to be heavy footed." Even after the law was passed, Louisville's reputation remained tarnished. William Peoples, writing in the *New Republic*, said that for fifteen years Louisville had built up a worthy record and "had nothing to be ashamed of when weighed in the national scale. Until last year."⁵⁴ The national verdict on Louisville during the open housing movement tarnished the city's reputation as a leader for its region and ruined its image as a city with progressive race relations. Over the next several years, observers in the city and elsewhere catalogued Louisville's racial ills and reconstructed



Louisville Defender, Thursday, July 22, 1965, from a scrapbook containing newspaper clippings pertaining to the civil rights movement in Louisville, Kentucky, during the years 1964-65. The Filson Historical Society

the community as a northern city with all that implied about attendant racial problems. As early as 1963, Hunter Thompson wrote that Louisville had “integrated itself out right out of the South” and that it now “faces problems more like those of a northern or midwestern city.”⁵⁵ The public accommodations law had eliminated a problem that most obviously identified Louisville, to use an earlier phrase, as “southern in its approach to the Negro.” However, between the passage of the local civil rights ordinance in 1963 and the open housing conflict in 1967, riots in northern and western communities had drawn attention to problems of overcrowding in slums, job discrimination, and police brutality. These issues became identified as “northern,” and thus a new negative racial reference was added to Birmingham: Harlem. Soon Louisville activists began to identify similar problems in their city and used the northern references as a warning. Black leaders asserted that Louisville’s schools had begun to re-segregate by way of white flight to the suburbs, the West End was becoming overcrowded and sinking into slum conditions, black residents faced growing employment discrimination as jobs moved to the south and east ends, and incidents of police harassment were increasing.⁵⁶ The West End Community Council vacillated between an optimistic and pessimistic rendering of the situation. At times it argued that as a border city, Louisville could lead the way out of these problems for both regions. But at other times it warned that without progress, Louisville “will simply move from the old problems of the South to the frightening racial problems of the North.”⁵⁷ Others argued that Louisville needed “to learn the lessons from other cities where there have been outbreaks of racial violence” such as Cleveland, Watts, or Harlem.⁵⁸ Indeed, in late May 1968, a month after riots ravaged American cities in the wake of the assassination of Martin Luther King, Louisvillians learned that it could “happen here.” For four days, Louisville suffered from a civil disturbance stemming from anger over a police harassment case and simmering frustration over continued housing and job discrimination.⁵⁹

The May 1968 riot received little attention from the national media. But a few years later, another kind of riot—white violence during anti-busing protests—once again put the city’s racial and regional identity in the national spotlight. White residents commonly associated busing with northern cities and in the national coverage of the controversy, Louisville frequently appeared alongside Boston in articles describing scenes of mobs damaging buses and shopping areas. One author wrote at the start of school year in 1975 that “Louisville found itself abruptly face-to-face with a community crisis—and with a violently racist image to rival that of Birmingham and Boston.”⁶⁰ Ironically, Louisville’s realization of its midwestern identity coincided with a change in the South’s racial code; to be “northern” now evoked problems of intransigent racism.

During the late 1960s, changes in national perceptions of regional racial

codes transformed the construction of Louisville’s racial and regional identity. When southern meant “bad,” white leaders saw Louisville as a border city on the leading edge of the South, a racially liberal city at the forefront of regional progress. However, black leaders continually contested Louisville’s identity, pushing the city to emulate midwestern cities, considered better in racial terms, in order to maintain its reputation. White conservatives, meanwhile, used the reputation to call for gradualism; in effect, to slow down change. By the mid-1960s, however, white liberals and moderates began to employ some of the activists’ rhetoric, pushing for the city to emulate midwestern neighbors in order to preserve Louisville’s identity as a leader in race relations. Ironically, just as whites adopted the new rhetoric, two changes reconstructed Louisville’s regional and racial identity. First, the conflict over open housing undercut the city’s position, in image and in reality, as a leader in racial change for the South. Continuing racial problems, culminating in the riot and the violent reaction to busing, then cast the community in a much different light. Second, the meanings of regional racial codes changed. When Jim Crow was the most obvious manifestation of racism, the South served as a negative pole for race relations. According to this code, Louisville was a southern city primarily because of segregation in its schools and public facilities. By the late-1960s, however, the North became associated, perhaps more than the South, with intransigent racial hostility, poverty, and discrimination. Louisville remained a border community, but the meaning of that position had changed. Instead of marking Louisville as a progressive leader in a benighted South, now the city became identified in the new code with the racial problems of both North and South.

What does the reconstruction of regional codes tell us about the North/South dichotomy in the scholarship on the civil rights movement? Recently, historians have begun to challenge the narrative that divides the movement between a nonviolent southern phase and a violent separatist northern phase. Part of this new historiography stems from an effort to find new ways of talking about regional racial problems. Louisville’s rhetorical conflict over its regional identity, including its assumptions about the nature of its race relations, shows that people at the time did speak in regional codes—the South as the seat of Jim Crow, the North as the “promised land,” and the Midwest and West as places without rigid mores—and that those codes changed in the late 1960s. This pattern gives weight to the narrative dichotomy between North and South. But the Louisville example also illustrates how some people tried to change regional identities and the assumptions about race relations that underlay them. Historians need to examine similar rhetorical challenges to understand how northerners and midwesterners, before the mid-1960s riots, tried to undercut the regional code and the underlying assumptions about race in their communities. ♠

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