A Black Odyssey

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Introduction

Black Americans everywhere anticipated that the triumph of “Union and Liberty” would bring in its wake unparalleled opportunities for their race. The egalitarian rhetoric loosed by the Emancipation Proclamation appeared to herald a new age. Afro-Americans of all conditions, classes, and sections eagerly looked forward to the fruits of full citizenship. Rather quickly Negroes realized that the North’s commitment to equal rights was transitory and that the South was merely biding time, waiting for the chance to exclude the freedman from participation in the political process and relegate him to servile status in the region’s economic system. By 1876 North and South were ready to make their peace. Northern businessmen, a dominant element in the Republican party, were anxious to finance the industrialization of the South and were more than willing to abandon the Negro in return for that privilege. Believing the campaign for black suffrage and equal rights to be a threat to “orderly economic development” and to the survival of the Republican party in the South, Northern business leaders announced that the racial question was now passe and urged the nation to move on to the more pressing problems connected with industrialization and commerce. Thus, reconciliation and nationalism became the order of the day, but they were accomplished at the expense of the Afro-American. Following the Compromise of 1877, the black man’s condition deteriorated not only in Dixie but throughout the country. “When the mantle of slavery was lifted,” cried a prominent black journalist in 1884, “it was believed that
the lifetime enemy of the black man was chained to the cold, jagged rocks of death as Prometheus to Mount Caucasus. . . . But not so, for even today we find ourselves confronted, nay, surrounded by an impenetrable fog of race prejudice, which is more gigantic, more widespread and equally as destructive to the welfare and progress of the people as the other—slavery." Increasingly, this prejudice manifested itself in the form of lynchings, discrimination, and systematic segregation.

The Negrophobia that began building with the fall of Radical Reconstruction culminated in the late 1880s and 1890s. Mississippi in 1890, followed by South Carolina in 1895 and Louisiana in 1898, incorporated disfranchisement provisions into its constitution. In the 1880s there was legal separation in southern schools and discrimination in the distribution of school funds. Jim Crow laws for railroads were enacted during the 1880s and 1890s. The convict lease system, a reincarnation of slavery, became widespread throughout the South. Lynchings reached an all-time new high, averaging more than 100 a year during the eighties and nineties, reaching a peak of 162 in 1892. The situation was better for blacks in the North, but even then they increasingly encountered extralegal discrimination and segregation. Their economic situation became ever more precarious as competition from millions of European immigrants forced blacks out of even menial jobs.

Not content with physical separation, disfranchisement, and economic exploitation of the Negro, a group of ultraracists emerged in the 1890s to argue that the very presence of the black man in America was a threat to the wealth and safety of the white majority. In an 1884 symposium on "The Future of the Negro," appearing in The North American Review, Senator John T. Morgan of Alabama argued that an increase in black wealth, intelligence, and capacity for industrial, commercial, and political activity was inevitable but potentially disastrous because it could only lead to increasingly bitter competition with whites. Because race prejudice would "forever remain as an incubus on all their individual or aggregate efforts," the only alternative for Negroes was to flee to Africa. Cruder white supremacists such as James K. Vardaman of Mississippi hinted rather unsubtly that the only solution to the Negro problem was a revival of the "peculiar institution."

Black responses to post-Civil War racism were many and varied, but as historian Martin Dann points out, they can all be reduced to two categories: inclusion—the desire for full citizenship, within an egalitarian society, involving a commitment to the American system; and exclusion—the rejection of American society through racial separation, generally expressed in movements for domestic or foreign colonization. A number
of blacks, however, were caught between these two approaches for rem­edying the unacceptable present. In certain areas of the United States limited economic and political opportunity had produced an upwardly mobile black elite which sought power and influence for itself and the race through emulation of the American creed of self-reliance, industry, thrift, and material accumulation. They accepted fully the Social Darwinism and laissez faire economics of the time.\textsuperscript{6} “It is simply a case of the survival of the fittest,” declared the black editor of the American Citizen in 1899. “The race would be able to command respect and be acknowledged in a business way by the Anglo-Saxon race if it possessed more real estate, business enterprise, and government bonds.”\textsuperscript{7} The racism that became increasingly explicit in America following the Compromise of 1877 posed a dilemma for these individuals. Most had enjoyed minor political office, limited economic success, and influence within the black community and, to a degree, among whites. Despite lynchings, discrimination, and segregation they remained committed to capitalism, democratic institutions, and the American creed.\textsuperscript{8} But their success had generated not only a positive attitude toward America, it had also led to expectations of something more. Their rising expectations, if not their acceptance of the American way of life, were threatened by the brutal racism of the 1880s and 1890s.

A number of these hopeful but increasingly frustrated Afro-Ameri­cans responded to their predicament by seeking a new life in the American West. Blacks were no less influenced by late nineteenth-century popular myths regarding the frontier than whites. Moreover, the siren call of the West affected not just the downtrodden, exploited masses of the South; educated, upwardly mobile Negroes such as Mifflin W. Gibbs of Pennsylvania and Edward P. McCabe of New York also perceived the West as a land of opportunity and individuality where a man was valued for his achievements, not his lineage or the color of his skin. Believing that Afro-Americans would be able to acquire wealth and exercise political power in the sparsely populated and economically underdeveloped areas beyond the Mississippi, a group of lawyers, journalists, teachers, and economic opportunists moved to California, Kansas, Montana, and Nebraska in the 1870s and 1880s. In some regions and in some activities these immigrants did enjoy greater freedom than they had either in the North or South. In Kansas, for example, blacks encountered discrimi­nation in public services, in the administration of justice, and in employment. They were segregated in hotels, restaurants, and theaters; and were excluded from white hospitals, churches, and neighborhoods. And yet during the same period there were integrated schools at one level or
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another in all sections of the state, public facilities were open to Negroes on both an integrated and segregated basis, and blacks were protected in their effort to vote. With one exception, legally mandated segregation was nonexistent. Influenced themselves by the prevailing popular image of the frontier, by the West's free soil tradition, and by American Protestantism, a majority of whites in Kansas and other western states made a commitment to racial advancement in the form of parallel development. That is, they were willing to leave blacks alone, allowing them the right to vote, to own property, and to enjoy the benefits of a public education. Beyond this, however, the state felt no obligation to the black man. Indeed, "charity"—direct relief and free land grants, for example—would only undermine the Negro's individual initiative and retard the progress of the race. In reality, the doctrine of parallel development merely froze the status quo. It left blacks without the land and capital necessary to collective economic advancement. In addition, because white westerners perceived poverty as a badge of moral depravity and wealth as a symbol of divine favor, the concept of parallel development tended to exacerbate racial prejudice. Thus, by the 1890s a number of the upwardly mobile blacks who had come west some ten to fifteen years earlier found themselves disillusioned, frustrated, and confronted with the same dilemma that had compelled them to immigrate initially.

Caught between a desire to work within the existing political and economic framework, thus realizing the promise of American life, and a desire to reject the system, thus escaping the racial prejudice to be found in the American milieu, these members of the black middle class once again sought the best of both worlds by turning to America's New Empire then emerging in the nonwhite, underdeveloped regions of the world. For these men, participation in the nation's burgeoning and far-flung commercial network seemed the perfect solution to the cruel dilemma of the 1890s. By establishing rubber plantations, obtaining mining concessions, and founding trading corporations in nonwhite areas, the black entrepreneur could simultaneously escape the prison of race prejudice while retaining the blessings of American citizenship. This third approach, they believed, would not only enhance their personal power and prestige but, by adding to the collective wealth of the black community, also contribute to the welfare of the race as a whole. And it would prove that blacks as well as whites were proper vehicles for the spread of civilization. These men were not separatists. Although fully aware of the racial injustice that characterized American society, they remained convinced that the Constitution, the free enterprise system, and the principles of the Declaration of Independence offered the best opportunity for the
black man to achieve political power and equality of economic opportunity. Yet, they were men on the make, impatient to fulfill their destiny. In short, acceptance of the moral and material values of late nineteenth-century America by these disciples of Horatio Alger impelled them toward duplication of white society while racism compelled them to pursue the American dream in isolation, apart from the society to which they were committed.

No black American was more determined to realize the promise of American life nor more frustrated by his inability to do so than John Lewis Waller. Politician, lawyer, journalist, and diplomat, Waller, whose first twelve years were spent in slavery, overcame his humble beginnings and to a remarkable degree realized his potential as an individual. Migrating to frontier Kansas in the late 1870s, he quickly rose to a position of leadership in the black community and became an important figure in the state Republican party. His political career came to an abrupt halt in 1890, however, when the Republicans rejected his bid to be nominated as the party's candidate for state auditor. Frustrated by his inability to break into the inner circle of power and convinced that his defeat was due to the rising tide of racism both in Kansas and throughout the nation, he searched frantically for an option that would allow him further growth and achievement. Waller was a true product of the late nineteenth century. He fully accepted the conservative, Social Darwinist, and laissez-faire economic views of his times. A hard-money, high-tariff Republican, he believed in the Gospel of Wealth and the Protestant Ethic as vehicles for both personal fulfillment and racial uplift. Expatriation was, therefore, out of the question. Participation in America's rising commercial empire, on the other hand, would permit him to continue to enjoy the privileges of American citizenship (as he perceived them) and at the same time avoid the discrimination that dogged the footsteps of blacks as they sought to exercise their civil rights and compete for the economic rewards available in a free society.

Specifically, Waller hoped to establish a vast plantation in some nonwhite, underdeveloped region of the globe that would simultaneously serve as a vehicle for his own ambitions and as a haven for other oppressed but upwardly mobile Afro-Americans. An opportunity to realize this dream came in 1891 when President Benjamin Harrison appointed him United States consul to Madagascar. For three years he curried favor with the native monarchy, and then in 1894 Waller retired from the consular service and obtained a huge land grant from the Malagasy government.

The ex-consul's plans, however, were to be thwarted once again by
racism, this time in the guise of French imperialism. Africa in the 1890s was the site of an intense colonial rivalry among the major European powers. This was true no less of Madagascar than the Congo or Northwest Africa. By 1895 France had elbowed its way to the front in the competition for control of the huge east African island. Viewing Waller and his plans for the founding of a black utopia as a threat to their hegemony in Madagascar, French authorities in 1895 quashed the concession, arrested Waller, and sentenced him to twenty years in prison.

To France's surprise, expropriation and incarceration of the black entrepreneur provoked a full-scale diplomatic confrontation with the United States. Such diverse interest groups as the black press, white commercial expansionists, black Democrats, and, of course, the Republican party, saw in the case an opportunity to advance their own particular causes. Responding to pressure from these sources, President Cleveland's administration labored mightily throughout 1895 and early 1896 to secure Waller's liberation and to protect his land grant. Unfortunately for Waller, the price Paris demanded for his release was American acquiescence in the French protectorate over Madagascar. When the government in Washington subsequently met France's terms, Waller found himself an empire-builder *sans* empire. Just as his drive in the United States to achieve power and prestige for himself and his brethren through political participation had been blunted by domestic racism, so his program of personal and group advancement through overseas business enterprise was thwarted by international racism in the form of European imperialism.

This book, although touching both subjects, is neither a comprehensive study of the black community in Kansas nor an in-depth inquiry into race relations at the turn of the century. Rather, it focuses on the career of a single individual—an ambitious, resourceful black American—and his efforts to realize personal fulfillment in a racist world. John Waller was both a product and a victim of his times, and thus, I believe, his tale deserves to be told.
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