IN WHITE WORLDS

Politics

Next to victory is the glory and happiness of manfully contending for it.
Therefore, contend! contend!
—Frederick Douglass, 1892

It is evident that the prejudice to our people in many localities is growing worse each year. This in my opinion is due to the rapid progress of the Negro rather than to his former condition.

Cairo was always “diabolically Democratic,” at least until the “man and brother” from the cotton-fields and jungles of the South parted company with the swamp alligators and toothsome possums [sic] of that region and came upon the town like the black ants of his native Africa.
—H. C. Bradsby, Cairo, Illinois, 1883

I would advise the colored voters, in view of the treatment they have received at the hands of the Republican party in Ross county, to assert some political independence in municipal elections. While we are Republicans in principle, yet I do not deem it necessary and right we should support men adverse to our civil and political rights.
—“Helmet,” Chillicothe, Ohio, 1887

African American migrants to midwestern towns entered fervently partisan and deeply divided political environments. As easily identifiable newcomers who usually voted as a bloc, their political behavior was closely scrutinized by both the white Republicans they normally helped and the Democrats they hurt. But since existing state laws, federal and state court decisions, and the action or inaction of local officials could have a direct impact on their daily lives and the future of their children, African Americans in pursuit of freedom had a strong incentive collectively to seek political change. Such struggles were facilitated by a tradition of resistance to oppression developed during slavery and nourished during the tumultuous times since emancipation.

A recent historian of twentieth-century migrations finds “remarkable” how quickly African Americans in metropolitan centers “developed political capacity,” but that capacity had been cultivated during the age of the village, which preceded the movement to midwestern
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metropolises. African Americans’ quest for freedom, which had brought them to the Midwest, made them political actors in their new homes.

Historians have long recognized the years around the turn of the century as a period of worsening race relations in the United States. In the South disfranchisement and segregation were entrenched, having been brought to completion and then safeguarded by mob violence. The white North not only acquiesced in the cancellation of southern blacks’ constitutional rights, but also produced its own wave of mob violence, as well as a creeping tide of de facto segregation, job discrimination, and reduction of African American political influence. Hardening of northern whites’ racial attitudes has been attributed to the southern example and to factors such as a yearning for sectional reconciliation, the spread of racism in intellectual circles, growing sympathy for imperialism, and fear of class conflict, which white northern editorialists were increasingly associating with African Americans. Such explanations implicitly portray black northerners as passive victims of forces originating from sources beyond their control. Yet in the face of discriminatory structures and practices, African Americans did have a choice whether to acquiesce or to resist. When they resisted, they added a new and turbulent cross-current to already troubled waters.

AT THE STATE LEVEL

Of the three levels of government, the local exerted the most direct and conspicuous impact on Americans during the late nineteenth century. Locally set and assessed property taxes were the only taxes paid directly by individuals. Insofar as manufacturers’ locational choices were affected by government action, only local inducements were offered. Community liquor-licensing authorities, judges, police, and marshals held the keys to peace and order. Enforcement of state laws depended almost wholly upon local officials’ willingness to cooperate. Nevertheless, local authorities operated within a legal context shaped by their state government and, much more distantly, by federal authority.

In the Lower Midwest, the drastic changes during the Civil War decade in state laws governing the status of African Americans still left significant disabilities. In every state, African Americans mobilized to dismantle the remaining framework of discrimination. Indispensable to these campaigns were the region’s precariously balanced politics and adult African American males’ status as voters following ratification of the Fifteenth Amendment in 1870. Between 1876 and 1892, the average gap between Republicans and Democrats in the east north central states was less than three percentage
points, the second smallest among the nation’s regions. Major-party political battles in Ohio, Indiana, and Illinois during the 1870s, 1880s, and 1890s were fought in one of the most competitive environments in American political history. Joseph B. Foraker, Ohio governor, U.S. senator, and one of the central figures in Ohio politics during this period, later articulated a guiding belief of midwestern European American politicians: “The Negro vote was so large that it was not only an important but an essential factor in our considerations. It would not be possible for the Republican party to carry the state if that vote should be arrayed against us.”

Although this belief depended upon several dubious assumptions, events seemed to confirm it often enough that it took on “a life of its own.”

Although Afro-Midwesterners voted overwhelmingly Republican in most elections throughout the period, even before ratification of the Fifteenth Amendment the Democrats began to pursue their vote. This represented a drastic about-face from the party’s previous strategy toward black voting, which was to play the “race card” by scaremongering about the drastic political and social consequences that would allegedly follow black enfranchisement. After African Americans began to vote, however, Democrats executed a “New Departure,” in which they rubbed and scraped at the festering sore in the Republican–African American alliance, Republicans’ unwillingness to reward African American voters with a proportionate share of political rewards. By doing so, Democrats aimed to detach as much as possible of the African American vote from their Republican rivals. One Republican editor sarcastically portrayed the Democrats’ change of attitude: “[B]efore the war the d——d nigger was a slave; after the war the ignorant negro was free; at the present time our intelligent fellow-citizen is a voter.”

The New Departure accounts for an otherwise curious aspect of one of the principal political achievements of African Americans in the Lower Midwest during this era. In 1883 the U.S. Supreme Court struck down the federal Civil Rights Act. Shortly thereafter, state legislatures in Ohio (1884), Indiana (1885), and Illinois (1883) passed state civil rights acts outlawing racial discrimination in public accommodations. The responsible legislatures in Ohio and Indiana were under Democratic control. Democratic votes were also crucial to the passage of civil rights legislation through Illinois’s divided legislature.

In Ohio, where African American voters were most numerous both absolutely and proportionately, and where African American votes seemed to have contributed to election of a Democratic governor as well as the civil rights legislature, Democratic overtures set off a bidding war with Republicans that produced a series of statutory victories for blacks. In 1887 a Republican legislature repealed a law providing for separate schools for blacks, as well as
one forbidding racial intermarriage. Ohio's African American legislators and their European American allies were able subsequently to head off retrogressive legislation and to introduce and shepherd to enactment bills prohibiting discrimination by life insurance companies (1889), strengthening the civil rights law (1894), and mandating sanctions for local officials who offered insufficient resistance to lynching mobs (1896). 18

In Indiana, where African American voters remained more steadfast in their loyalty to the GOP, fewer legislative gains were won. Acts of 1869 and 1877 forbade local school authorities from excluding African American children, and in 1899 Indiana passed an antilynching law at the urging of a Republican governor. Two years later, another Republican governor, acting under the law's provisions, removed from office a sheriff whom he deemed to have been derelict in his duty of protecting an African American prisoner from a lynching mob. But at century's end, Indiana remained the only state in the Lower Midwest to exclude African Americans from militia service by statute, and one of only two northern states to forbid racial intermarriage. 19

Whereas in Ohio enactment of a civil rights law initiated a series of African American legislative gains, in Illinois passage of the civil rights law capped a generally successful period of struggle. Illinois's new constitution in 1870 desegregated the militia and required universal public education. Subsequent school laws in 1872 and 1874 clarified and reinforced the responsibility of local officials to provide equal education to all students. 20 In succeeding years African American state legislators fought, albeit unsuccessfully, for bills to suppress mob violence, to prevent racial discrimination by life insurance companies, and to protect and extend the rights of poor and working-class citizens. They succeeded in incorporating the African American militia regiment into the state national guard and in strengthening the civil rights law. 21 These gains were won despite the handicap of a mass base that was smaller in absolute numbers than in Ohio and, more telling, was smaller as a proportion of the total electorate than in either Ohio or Indiana.

African Americans actively worked for the gains they won from state legislatures. 22 Most important, African Americans cast ballots in sufficient numbers to make their votes a prize worth fighting over. Under the leadership of men such as Cincinnati's Peter Clark, Evansville's Charles E. Sheldon, and Cairo's William T. Scott, some African American voters acted independently. In Ohio black Republicans responded to the Democratic victory in 1883 by organizing a network of equal-rights leagues in many of the state's urban communities. The leagues' goals were the repeal of the separate-school law and the anti-intermarriage law, both achieved four years later. Periodic conventions were held in each state, and statewide
organizations were established for agitation and lobbying. African Americans wrote letters to African American and European American periodicals, petitioned, caucused, rallied, and marched. The statewide organizational impulse culminated in 1890, when each of the three states created a unit of the National Afro-American League, founded three years before at the initiative of New York editor T. Thomas Fortune. Anticipating the program of the NAACP, the league demanded an end to limitations on voting rights, action to halt racist violence, bans on discrimination in schools and public facilities, and cessation of exploitation of convicts and workers. The state affiliates in Ohio and Indiana soon folded, but the Illinois branch continued to be active through the 1890s. In Ohio the league failed to put down roots because African American leaders did not share the pessimism that motivated Fortune. In a statement that rings only somewhat less true for Indiana and Illinois, David Gerber summarizes the achievements in Ohio that fueled their optimism:

While there had been no moral revolution accompanying the ameliorative trend of the 1880s, a high point in the history of racial advancement in Ohio had nonetheless been reached—a high point which, though dependent upon enfranchisement, in an important sense exceeded it as a racial landmark. While obtaining the vote had been vital to the achievement of citizenship and hence of the gains of the 1880s, enfranchisement was an act done for blacks by whites with little reference to black feelings and aspirations. However much moral support blacks had lent the process, they had lacked the power to be among its prime movers; instead, they had been placed in the degrading position of watching and waiting while others determined their fate. In contrast, the achievements of the 1880s had been deeply influenced by black political power and black activities in pursuit of racial welfare. As voters, lobbyists, legislators, and politicians, blacks had proven to be skilled manipulators of the party system and of government, and they had significantly furthered their own advancement.

Despite the effort that underwrote legislative gains and the undeniable legal changes that occurred, in the final analysis African American progress was severely limited. White politicians allowed no more changes in their state’s racial status quo than were perceived as necessary to attract or secure black votes. No new state agencies were created to enforce the civil rights or school laws, leaving individuals to depend upon state authorities to act or, in the absence of state action, to pursue their legal rights in the courts at their own expense. This left complainants at the mercy of lawyers and judges. The
former sometimes subverted efforts to push forward test cases, and the latter often interpreted the statutes as narrowly as possible. Suits against refusal of service in Indiana restaurants, for example, were deterred by an 1888 ruling that the plaintiff had to prove the owner’s responsibility for discriminatory acts by his staff. Indiana’s public-accommodations law was such a dead letter that George L. Knox, who as editor of the *Freeman* energetically championed civil rights, refused to serve African American customers in the elite barber shop he operated in Indianapolis. So did George Myers, confidant of power broker Mark Hanna and owner of a first-class Cleveland barber shop. Had Knox and Myers felt that they were required by the authority of their respective states’ civil rights laws to serve their fellow African Americans, no doubt they would have done so.

School laws did not produce education for African American children of equal quality with European American students across any of the three states. Ohio came closest. Ohio’s 1887 school desegregation law, framed by African American legislator and future AME bishop Benjamin Arnett, brought about rapid and peaceful desegregation in a majority of the state’s school districts. Since European American parents would rarely consent to their children’s being taught by an African American, the law’s implementation also resulted in widespread job losses by African American teachers. These costs were most severe in Cincinnati, where a separate system had flourished since before the Civil War. In a few communities African Americans agreed to retain segregated schools. In others, including Arnett’s home town of Xenia, school authorities gerrymandered the city to ensure that segregation was maintained. Washington Court House abandoned its “colored” school, but African American students in its integrated schools were all taught by European American teachers.

Illinois’s school laws of 1872 and 1874 mandated local authorities to provide equal education to all students, but, while this required that black students be given equal access to schools, it did not specify that the schools be racially integrated. Thus, by omission rather than by argument, Illinois law accepted the principle of separate but equal, thereby anticipating the doctrine enunciated by the U.S. Supreme Court in *Plessy v. Ferguson* (1896). In districts where there were too few black children to make building a separate school economically feasible, they were integrated into white schools. But where their numbers were greater, locally mandated segregated schools were legal. African American parents who objected to their children’s assignment to a separate school could choose between launching a civil suit on grounds of inequality or a political campaign against the offending school board trustees. “Alternatives offered by the Illinois Supreme Court,” writes Robert
McCaul, “thus placed the initiative and expense squarely on the blacks and exposed them likewise to the dangers of reprisals from the whites.”

Indiana’s law allowed separate schools where black numbers made them financially feasible and imposed no requirement that facilities for black children, whether integrated or segregated, be equal to those for whites. Indianapolis built and maintained separate schools, which came closer to the European American standard than elsewhere in the state. The capital city also integrated its high schools. In the southern part of the state, however, high school instruction for African Americans was provided as a meager adjunct to the segregated primary schools. The relatively large number of segregated schools gave employment to African American teachers.

Outside of Indianapolis, however, African American teachers taught using facilities and materials that fell below the European American norm. This was not a matter of oversight, but rather a product of judicial action. In an 1884 case brought to the Indiana Supreme Court (State ex. rel. Mitchell v. Gray), the justices ruled that an African American parent had no recourse against clearly unequal separate schooling. Recognizing that further appeal was futile, black Hoosiers took no further cases to the state supreme court.

Other active and looming forms of racial prejudice escaped legislative sanction. No law prohibited discrimination in hiring or wage rates, or forced unions to admit blacks. No law banned restrictive covenants or other means to prevent African Americans from moving into European American neighborhoods. The white residents of Washington Court House who lived in the new subdivisions on the town’s west side had no need to fear contact with black neighbors. At the other end of the region’s urban hierarchy, neither did white Chicagoans living outside that city’s new black enclaves. Even if restaurants would agree to serve them, poor black workers could not afford to patronize most such establishments.

At least one African American served in the lower house of each state legislature more or less continuously from the mid-1870s, and some representatives, such as Ohio’s Benjamin Arnett and Harry Smith and Illinois’s John W. E. Thomas, distinguished themselves. Arnett and Thomas led the fights for their states’ civil rights acts, and Smith took the lead in the struggle to strengthen Ohio’s civil rights law in 1894 and framed the successful antilynching bill two years later. Even the most energetic and effective African American politicians in the Midwest, however, exercised what influence they possessed on the sufferance of their European American counterparts. Smith’s political career, for example, effectively ended after the escalating horrors of lynching during the 1890s drove him to an emotional blast against the false pretenses of American liberty.
politicians operated within a political structure controlled by European Americans, and that fact strictly limited their options, both of thought and deed. Neither mobilization at the grassroots, action outside the narrow bounds of formal politics, nor coalition with agrarian or urban radicals was conceivable for these upwardly mobile men.\textsuperscript{35}

Yet imaginative approaches became more and more necessary as the 1890s waned. In each of the three states Republicans gained the upper hand over their Democratic rivals, and, as their new advantage became clear, Republican politicians lost what interest they once had in bidding for the African American vote.\textsuperscript{36} Whether from optimism arising from African American gains, pessimism generated by losses, or mere recognition of their weakening leverage, African American leaders abandoned the initiative and went on the defensive by the turn of the century.\textsuperscript{37} Stalemate at the state level, however, did not necessarily imply stasis in local communities. On the contrary, the very weaknesses of African American gains in state capitals, together with the inherent importance of local government, produced continued struggle and conflict in local communities.

\section*{AT THE LOCAL LEVEL}

Understanding African American struggle and the European American response within local communities requires a broad definition of political conflict, one that transcends the limited terrain of voting and office holding. Conflict took many more forms than formal politics, and, although other struggles often intersected or overlapped with partisan warfare, neither formal competition nor informal strife necessarily determined the outcome in the other realm.\textsuperscript{38} African American striving for a better life destabilized midwestern communities through challenges to the distribution of jobs, offices, and schools. Meanwhile, through local experience European American residents came to perceive their African American neighbors as likely transgressors of what whites regarded as community mores.

One way in which such perceptions were shaped was the definition and punishment of deviant behavior. The key actors were local police officers. Since sheriffs, town marshals, and sometimes even constables were elected, they presumably reflected the attitudes of their largely European American constituency. In turn, their actions confirmed and further shaped local perceptions of deviancy. The evidence of police behavior reveals a wide gap between treatment of European Americans and African Americans as well as the application of quite different standards of justice. Despite stipulations in state civil rights laws that prohibited racial discrimination in jury
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selection, bailiffs called few African Americans for jury duty. African Americans won jobs as police officers in some towns—Crawfordsville, Indiana, and Springfield, Illinois, for example—but across the region they were even scarcer than African American jurors. Furthermore, the region held few African American attorneys. The result was an overwhelmingly white criminal justice system, which applied northern, European American, urban standards of behavior to African American newcomers from largely rural backgrounds. To make matters worse, both antebellum rhetoric emphasizing the degrading effects of slavery and partisan-inspired Democratic racial slanders prepared midwestern whites to perceive African Americans’ behavior as characteristically deviant.

In cities African Americans were more likely than European Americans to be arrested for petty crimes: men for “loitering,” “disorderly conduct,” and “disturbing the peace,” and women for prostitution. African Americans held mass meetings to protest police brutality, and sometimes police officers were convicted of criminal charges for such assaults or fined as a result of
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civil actions. Whites were more often charged with serious crimes than blacks, but African Americans were tried more quickly, convicted more frequently, and received longer sentences for similar offenses. Across Ohio the county jails, which housed those convicted of middle-level offenses as well as offenders who could not afford to pay their fines, consistently held a disproportionate number of African American prisoners over the period from 1872 to 1916.

Washington Court House reflected the general pattern. A sample drawn from the Fayette County jail register during the last quarter of the nineteenth century reveals a pronounced tendency among local police officials to incarcerate African Americans. In figure 4.1, the bottom line indicates the number of arrests of African Americans that would have been proportionate to African American representation in the county population, while the top line shows the same hypothetical number of prisoners for the European American population. The middle two lines reflect the actual numbers of white and black prisoners.

Although the numbers are small, the trends are clear. In all but two of the sampled years (1887 and 1890) African Americans were arrested at a higher rate than their proportion of the population would have predicted. The same pattern appeared in Xenia during 1901–1902. The evidence from these two communities, the only small midwestern towns for which data have been gathered, signify clearly the presence of a perception of excessive African American criminality among local police. Furthermore, while during the 1880s the pattern was mixed, during the 1890s African Americans were consistently overrepresented among Fayette County prisoners, suggesting an intensifying concern with African American criminality.

Of all the issues that embroiled local politics in the Lower Midwest, one stands out, both because of its durability and on account of the intensity of the passions it aroused. That issue was schools. Pressure came from both sides of the color line. African American parents wanted better education for their children, and many of them had pulled up roots in the South and migrated north primarily for that reason. Some European American parents were willing to accept school integration. African American women who grew up in Canton and Cleveland remembered being made to feel no color consciousness—until high school. Then a teacher discouraged career aspirations, and a principal separated a biracial couple on a dance floor. School officials no doubt thought they acted on behalf of color-conscious parents, and it seems that a sufficiently large number of parents to keep local climates highly charged did not want their children attending school with African American children. State laws in Indiana and Illinois provided no resolution, since they left the issue of separate schools to local option. Even
in Ohio, where state law after 1887 gave community officials no right to sustain separate schools, the weight of local opinion was sometimes able to prevail in keeping them separate.\textsuperscript{49} Given the intensity of parental feeling on the issue, however, and the absence of state machinery beyond the courts capable of enforcing state law, local situations were often unstable. And since town and county officials were the only instruments through which local option could be exercised, the schools issue constantly threatened to infiltrate formal politics. Similarly, political partisanship pervaded decision making regarding schools.\textsuperscript{50}

If access to industrial jobs for men, gainful work for women, and home ownership for families made the Lower Midwest a crazy quilt of varying opportunities, schools overlaid on the pattern another layer of complexity. African American children attended the same classes as European American children in some communities in each state, most often in Ohio, least commonly in Indiana.\textsuperscript{51} But integration and segregation could coexist, not only within the same local school system, but also within the same school. Within “integrated” schools, African American children were taught in a separate room, known as the “fifth room”; were forced to sit together in the classroom; or were required to use separate drinking cups.\textsuperscript{52} Like employment opportunities and residential segregation, the pattern of African American treatment in schools was subject to change. Whether faced with segregated or integrated schools, African American parents demanded better treatment for their children. European American parents pressed back, insisting on further circumscription of African American “privileges.” Community leaders considered the condition of their schools an important feature of the face the community presented to the outside world and segregated, desegregated or resegregated them accordingly.

African American parents confronted teachers and administrators singly and collectively to protest discriminatory behavior.\textsuperscript{53} In Cairo, before Illinois amended its constitution to allow black children to attend public schools, a group of parents led by an African American teacher, T. J. Shores, marched on one of the schools to demand either access to the white schools or public support for black schools. After separate schools were established in Cairo in accordance with state law, more than 125 African American parents and school children occupied a European American school building to back their demands either to bring the black school closer to white standards or to admit black children to white schools. Their sit-in was successful in that local authorities renovated the existing black elementary school, soon built a second, and then constructed a high school for African American students. The high school became a focus of the African American community and featured the teaching of black history. Among whites, the sit-in created fric-
tion that eventually destroyed the Republican coalition, and the daughter of a school board trustee concluded that her black neighbors represented “the most impudent, irrational, unruly race that ever walked the globe.”

African Americans also turned to the courts to assert their rights. As historian Morgan Kousser points out, “In an era when black communities were generally small and poor, and before the 1909 founding of the NAACP gave some national co-ordination to the legal struggle for racial equality, blacks were very active in asserting their civil rights through the courts.” This was abundantly true of the Lower Midwest, where African Americans launched at least thirty-three cases challenging racial discrimination in schools, two-fifths of all those that Kousser discovered across the United States between 1834 and 1903. The bulk of these appeared during the years between the Civil War and the century’s end. Black Ohioans initiated fifteen cases over twenty years beginning in 1871. In Indiana African Americans filed five court challenges before 1884, when an adverse decision closed off all avenues of redress. Six cases were launched in Illinois, capped by the monumental Bibb struggle in Alton, which began in 1897 and lasted into the twentieth century. Case titles reflect accurately the local focus of these challenges: Gibson v. Oxford, Ohio; Jackson v. Felicity, Ohio; Longress v. Quincy, Illinois; McColum v. Xenia, Ohio; Nelson v. Springfield, Ohio; Pear v. Upper Alton, Illinois; Townsend v. Richmond, Indiana; and Taylor v. Centralia, Illinois.

Black pressure could produce white counterpressure. In the aftermath of passage of Ohio’s Arnett Law outlawing separate schools, local school boards “used branch schools, fifth rooms, gerrymandering, organized and unorganized violence, threats, harassment, intimidation, and prolonged legal strategies to keep blacks from integrating Ohio public schools.” After the postwar demonstration at a white school in Cairo, school officials revoked T. J. Shores’s teaching certificate, and the fury of an aroused European American public opinion drove him from the town. But even when there was no immediate push by African Americans for increased access or better facilities, European American parents exerted pressure of their own. Conflict erupted in Springfield, Ohio, during the early 1880s, involving a demonstration by African American students, a court case (Gazaway v. White, 1882), and a referendum. But once the Ohio legislature passed the Arnett Law in 1887, Springfield schools quietly desegregated. Seventeen years later, a white teacher wrote:

[A]nimosity on the part of the whites toward the colored is strong and growing; and on the part of the colored race there is a growing jealousy of rights, real or supposed. It is manifest everywhere. In the public
schools the separation of colored and white children was abolished twenty [sic] years ago; and the plan has been provocative of trouble. Oftentimes white parents refuse to permit their children to sit by the colored in the school room; and, on the other hand, many colored parents are so jealous of their social rights that they object to any approach to a plan of seating the children in the school room as to bring them in a group by themselves.  

When Grace Brewer graduated as the only African American in her class at Vincennes (Indiana) High School, her eight classmates boycotted the occasion. When Charles Bunch at age six began to attend the Washington School in Centralia, Illinois, with five other black pupils, a campaign began to remove them, which was defeated only after African Americans and their European American allies carried the fight to the city council. The longest and most bitter such battle took place in Alton, Illinois, as a result of a decision by city officials to resegregate the schools, which had been integrated for a quarter of a century. Apparently the city fathers hoped to attract more European American migration to the community and felt that all-white schools would serve the purpose. The African American community rallied behind Scott Bibb and his children to fight the case through the courts, a sit-in, and boycott. After an epic struggle that extended over eleven years, seven jury trials, and five state supreme court appeals, and which attracted support for the complainants from across the state, Alton African Americans won their case in the courts. But they lost in Alton, as school officials successfully maintained that the state supreme court judgment applied only to the two Bibb children on whose behalf the case had been brought—who were now too old to attend. Alton schools remained segregated until the 1950s.

Unlike the struggles over schools, in which African Americans usually fought alone against European American officials, labor conflicts forced African Americans to take sides in clashes between two white factions, bosses and workers. The most common such battles took place in coal-mining towns, which were scattered across the southern regions of Ohio and Indiana and the breadth of Illinois. Conflicts raged both in communities that had been created by coal operators to mine newly discovered deposits and in already existing towns. Miners continually attempted to organize, and operators just as often resisted. Mine operators seeking to defeat organizing or striking miners found Emancipation a boon, and soon after the Civil War ended they were recruiting replacements or strikebreakers among the substantial numbers of experienced African American miners in the South. Edna Boysaw, born a slave on a Virginia plantation, told what happened next.
When Lincoln freed us, we rejoiced, yet we knew we had to seek employment now and make our own way. Wages were low. You worked from morning until night for a dollar, but we did not complain. About 1870 a Mr. Masten, who was a coal operator, came to Richmond [, Virginia] seeking laborers for his mines in Clay County. He told us that men could make four to five dollars a day working in the mines, going to work at seven and quitting at 3:30 each day. That sounded like a paradise to our men folks. Big money and you could get rich in little time. But he did not tell all, because he wanted the men folk to come with him to Indiana. Three or four hundred came with Mr. Masten. They were brought in box cars. Mr. Masten paid their transportation, but was to keep it out of their wages. My husband was in that bunch, and the women folk stayed behind until their men could earn enough for the transportation to Indiana.

When they arrived about four miles east of Brazil, or what was known as Harmony, the train was stopped and a crowd of white miners ordered them not to come any nearer Brazil. Then the trouble began. Our men did not know of the labor trouble, as they were not told of that part. Here they were fifteen hundred miles from home, no money. It was terrible. Many walked back to Virginia. Some went on foot to Illinois. Mr. Masten took some of them South of Brazil about three miles, where he had a number of company houses, and they tried to work in his mine there. But many were shot at from the bushes and killed. Guards were placed about the mine by the owner, but still there was trouble all the time. The men did not make what Mr. Masten told them they could make, yet they had to stay for they had no place to go.

When her husband was injured in the mine, Edna Boysaw brought her children to Indiana. She supported the family by washing for local families until her husband could return to work, more than a year later. “After the strike was settled,” she recalled, “things were better. . . . But the coal operators did not treat the colored folks very good. We had to trade at the Company store and often pay a big price for it.” But,” she concluded, “we had many white friends and sure was thankful for them.”

If the Boysaws’ white friends were coal miners, the family’s story was probably unusual. The coming of African American strikebreakers or replacements to a coal-mining town was not likely to endear them to European American miners whose jobs were to be given to the newcomers. In many communities, as in Brazil, white miners greeted the arrival of black miners with bullets. Such conflicts punctuated labor history in all three states of the Lower Midwest during the 1870s and 1880s, and continued in Illinois through the 1890s. They created a significant obstacle to attempts
by the United Mine Workers of America (UMWA) to construct a powerful and, hence, necessarily interracial, union in the coalfields. In 1895 a well-organized mob of mostly immigrant miners systematically attacked a colony of African American miners and their families in Spring Valley, Illinois, and drove all the residents from their homes. The African Americans had arrived during the previous year to replace striking miners. Bullets also met African American miners at Virden, Illinois, in 1898, and African American strikebreakers fought deadly gun battles with miners at Pana and Carterville in 1899.

In towns and cities with more diversified economies, African American strikebreakers became a target for angry strikers in other industries. African American strikebreakers appeared in metal-trades strikes in Springfield (1886), Fremont (1903), Hanging Rock (1904), and Cleveland, Ohio (1896, 1901). In Chicago they were used to break strikes among longshoremen (1863), meatpackers (1886, 1894, 1904), hotel workers (1887), railroad workers (1894), iron and steelworkers (1898), construction trades (1899, 1900), and teamsters (1905).

The relationship between black and white workers was not always one of competition and conflict. Cooperation sometimes replaced contention. Joint or allied action became most common during the 1880s, in the heyday of the Knights of Labor. Founded in 1869, the Knights’ local assemblies spread rapidly across the country during the early years of the 1880s. “The local assembly,” stated the model constitution, “is not a mere trade union or beneficial society, it is more and higher. It gathers into one fold all branches of honorable toil, without regard to nationality, sex, creed or color.” Sometimes midwestern Knights acted on these principles by organizing integrated local assemblies. Such an assembly was operating by 1883 in Richmond, Indiana. The European American majority wanted their African American comrades to organize separately, but the latter refused. One refuser was quoted as explaining that “this is the only organization in which we stand on an equal footing with the whites, and it is a big thing.” Perhaps the prospect of equality explains why African American membership in the Richmond assembly was growing much faster than the European American. African Americans did organize separate locals in both large and small communities across the Lower Midwest. Chicago had all-black assemblies (of waiters and ham bag sewers), but so did small towns Decatur and Murphysboro. Two African American assemblies operated in Indianapolis, and there was one each in Evansville, Cementville and Terre Haute. African American Knights organized in Cleveland and Columbus, and also in Dayton and Rendville. The Knights declined rapidly after 1886, and the craft unions that outlasted or replaced them were less prone
to allow African American membership. Unlike their craft union successors, the Knights were not loath to enter local politics in pursuit of their members’ interests. For African American workers, political engagement preceded the Knights’ brief but eventful struggle and continued after the organization’s decline.

The basic factors shaping local political conflict were the same everywhere throughout the region. African Americans consistently felt grievances stemming from discrimination and tried to wield their voting power to obtain satisfaction. Precariously balanced partisan forces produced a Republican need for black votes and a corresponding Democratic need to shake the Republican coalition, either by bidding for black votes or by appealing to racist white Republicans. Gallipolis, Ohio; Evansville, Indiana; and Cairo, Illinois are only three examples of towns in which African American support during the Gilded Age was crucial to Republican control. In this situation, African Americans had three options. First, they could organize within the Republican Party to achieve recognition and redress. This was no doubt the most common course taken. Republican support did pay off in some communities. During the late nineteenth century, African Americans elected their own aldermen or city councilors in Oberlin, Urbana, and Xenia, Ohio; and Cairo and Nokomis, Illinois. The large African American voting bloc in Pulaski County, Illinois, regularly elected African Americans as county and city councilmen, city attorney, county coroner, and police magistrate. But even in Chicago, where African Americans made up only 1 percent of the population, enfranchisement quickly produced the city’s first African American police officers as well as an all-black fire company. Remaining a nominal or active Republican loyalist seems to have been generally disappointing, however, as the GOP rarely rewarded its African American constituents with tangible recognition proportional to their support. The basic reasons why the Republican Party was so stingy when it came to rewarding African American loyalty were, first, that the party could usually depend on African American support and, second, that the Republicans feared leaving themselves vulnerable to the Democrats’ race card by making African American appointments. Punishing the Republicans for their stingy patronage was easily achieved when the electorate was as fully mobilized as it typically was during this period, since voters could hurt their party merely by staying home on Election Day. But for African Americans, defeating the Republicans meant placing their fate in the hands of a group of whites who were even less inclined to be sympathetic to their demands, and at the same time infuriating their erstwhile allies, who knew exactly whom to blame for their defeat.

The conditions facing African Americans in local communities across
the Midwest varied, of course, both from place to place and over time. At some times and in some places African Americans fought vigorously for their political rights, threatening white Republicans or retaliating for their snubs. Probably most of the time and in most communities African American voters sustained the GOP. When they did so, the label that is often applied to their politics is “accommodationist.” The term is useful only if we understand clearly that it refers to a strategy rather than a passive acceptance of marginality. In her study of the African American community in a small town—Geneva, New York—Kathryn Grover explains:

At different historical moments, Geneva’s African Americans contemplated their local situation and took its measure. They continually assessed and reassessed how open or closed local white society was, when it would allow them to take direct political action on their own behalf and when it would not. And when it did not, accommodation became a strategy, not a mindset—a means to an end, not a hapless end in itself. As a racial and statistical minority, for African Americans it was always a question of how much accommodation was necessary in order to live a stable life. At some times, local circumstances and the political climate of the region and country made action to improve the quality and opportunities of life for themselves and their children seem possible. Some sought broader improvement for their neighbors and their race generally. At other times, direct political action seemed only to promise to encumber them further, to heap liability upon fundamental disadvantage, and accommodation then seemed to be the only logical route to security.

The second option was to abandon the Republican Party for the Democrats, temporarily or permanently. Such a course required considerable personal courage amid the face-to-face relationships of intensely partisan small towns, where political leanings were hard to conceal. Political independence meant either refusing to allow emancipation to guide present choices or revising the Republican version of the history of emancipation, as a black Democrat later described to an interviewer. Attempting to explain why so many blacks voted Republican, William Hubbard said:

Well, they claim Abraham Lincoln freed them, and Abraham Lincoln didn't free them. They freed theirselves. And one woman told me, said, “Who told you that?” I said, “I can read, Lady.” Yeah, I can read. And my mother, she told us that, too, that Abraham Lincoln didn't free the colored people.

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Q. What . . . how did she explain it, I mean, that they freed themselves?
A. 'Cause they fought, I mean, to get freedom. They fought to get freedom, and they won the battle. If it'd been left to what-you-call-him they wouldn't have won no battle. They'd been still slaves, but they fought to be free.  

This avenue led to success on the state level in Ohio in 1883, when the new Democratic governor dispensed more patronage to African Americans than any previous Democratic and most Republican administrations, effectively raising the bar for his Republican successor. In addition, as noted above, the Democratic-controlled legislature enacted a state public-accommodations law. Three years earlier, black voters in Peru, Indiana, had demonstrated the success of swing voting when they helped to elect a Democratic sheriff who far outdid local Republicans in appointing African American deputies and bailiffs and summoning African American jurors. The risks of political independence, however, were clearly shown at the turn of the century in Cairo, Illinois. There, African American voters had sustained Republican hegemony since ratification of the Fifteenth Amendment. After Republicans in 1898 refused to support African American candidates, many black voters cast their ballots for either the Democrats or a local Negro Protective ticket. The Republicans were defeated. When they regained power, Republicans led the campaigns for a new voter registration law that effectively disfranchised many African Americans and a commission form of city government in which at-large voting severely reduced the clout of the remaining African American voters. Whether abandoning the Republicans elected Democrats or not, it had the certain effect—as black Republicans constantly pointed out—as black Republicans constantly pointed out—of dividing the African American vote and thereby diluting African Americans' already thin influence.

A third option involved declaring independence of both major parties. This course was probably taken even less often than the minority path of voting Democratic. Peter Clark, a longtime Cincinnati activist, in the late 1870s announced his conversion to socialism and advised African Americans to vote for the Ohio Workingman’s Party. Shortly afterward, however, Clark returned to the Republican ranks. Third-partyism did achieve one spectacular success on the local level, election of an African American mayor of a northern town. This occurred in 1887 in Rendville, Ohio, a mining community of about 1,000 residents, evenly divided between African Americans and European Americans. J. S. Tuppins was a druggist, born in Xenia, who opened a drug store in Rendville in 1886. More important for his political success, Tuppins helped to organize an African American local of the
Knights of Labor. The next year Tuppins ran as the Union Labor candidate for mayor and was elected. At least one more African American became mayor of Rendville in succeeding years, but by 1891, African Americans had returned to voting Republican. Rendville was clearly a highly politicized community, as it was also the home of Richard L. Davis, the only African American elected to the national executive board of the UMWA in the nineteenth century. But Tuppins’s election as a labor candidate had been made possible not only by the organization of local African American voters but also by a unique circumstance, the strength of the Knights of Labor, and after the Knights’ rapid decline in the late 1880s that circumstance no longer held.

Formal local politics thus provided African Americans an uncertain path to amelioration of their conditions, but a virtually certain means to annoy or alienate at least one sizable segment of the political community. Democratic anger at African American loyalty to the Republicans appeared in the vehemence of Democratic editors and speakers playing the race card. One particularly caustic practitioner was William C. Gould of Washington Court House, editor during the late 1860s and early 1870s of the local Democratic paper. Democrats also vented their resentment against white Republicans who were, in their view, too friendly to their black allies. George Knox was living in Greenfield, Indiana, during the controversy over African American migration from North Carolina in 1879. He reported that a European American storekeeper who had donated food to migrants arriving in Greenfield found his store burned down. White Republican antagonism manifested itself in the numerous incidents in which African American nominees or candidates were betrayed or scratched from the ticket. In Washington Court House, for example, black and white Republicans put together a biracial slate for local elections in 1872 under the label “Mechanics and Laborers.” The African American Masonic leader Alexander Anderson was the only black nominee for a seat on the town council. Anderson lost, however, while most of the rest of his slate swept to victory. Small-town politics in Gilded Age America was a vicious game, to be sure, and African Americans played it as hard as anyone else. African Americans, however, suffered from its treacheries more than other groups because their need for political change was more pressing than the rest. Politics then as always made strange bedfellows, but in the Lower Midwest there was always one political actor with whom few European Americans would freely agree to share a blanket.

At the end of the nineteenth century and during the early years of the twentieth, heightened antagonism between white and black Midwesterners and worsening conditions for African Americans resulted from an interplay
between white prejudice and black pressure for change and a similar two-way interaction between national trends and local struggles. As southern white demagogues and northern editors portrayed African Americans as unworthy and disruptive members of the body politic, midwestern whites witnessed at close range in their local communities African Americans’ broadly political behavior as strikebreakers, as competitors for office and influence, and as educational warriors. European Americans believed that African Americans should be grateful for past favors, but African Americans who perceived full citizenship as their right and their due saw discrimination in workplaces and schools and government offices as illegitimate restrictions on their freedom. African American struggles for change in a prejudiced white world do not, of course, justify either the European American image of them as a disruptive element or the heightening barriers to black aspirations that flowed from such perceptions. White racism was the cause of both enduring discriminatory practices and the new turn-of-the-century constraints, and European Americans made choices about whom to blame for their troubles. Seeing African Americans as especially disruptive required ignoring or minimizing the divisions and conflict evident among European American capitalists and workers, partisans and factional rivals, and various offenders against assorted local norms. Nor was it the only possible or likely image of blacks. Against it could be set an impression drawn from the quiet, steady work of, for example, many members of the Anderson, Chester, Weaver, and Oatmeal families in Washington Court House; the devotion of African American churchgoers; and the associational activity of members of African American voluntary societies. African Americans could equally well be seen as solid contributors to the best aspects of community life. Which image European Americans adopted depended on a choice, for neither was unambiguously true, and each could be accepted only by ignoring some dimensions of African American lives. Hard-working, churchgoing Andersons, Chesters, Weavers, and Oatneals were also political actors. Hard-working, churchgoing Andersons and Chesters were also purveyors of what many whites regarded as vice. White racism is not an historical constant, and has varied in breadth and intensity in response to changing contexts. African American struggles in midwestern localities, while they do not justify its coming, help to explain the gathering storm in the region and the nation.