Chapter Four

Rising “Black Metropolises”

The urbanization of Ohio’s black population reached a new level in the 1920s. This was the consequence of the black migration to Ohio cities that began slowly in the nineteenth century, gained momentum after 1890, accelerated sharply during World War I, and persisted at a high rate in the 1920s. What may be called “black metropolises” existed for the first time in Cleveland, Cincinnati, and Columbus. Various words are used to identify these great black urban enclaves that matured in the United States during the twenties, but a wholly proper name is elusive because no one term is entirely and literally descriptive of them. In the 1960s “ghetto” was the term that urban historians preferred. Each large black area in urban Ohio was a ghetto, which is defined as a district where an ethnic group is required to dwell. A ghetto perspective that employs residential proscription as a lens tends to narrowly focus attention on problems in black urban life while marginalizing its benefits. In the 1940s, sociologists St. Clair Drake and Horace R. Cayton used the phrase “black metropolis” in a figurative reference to black urban districts. Their study featured urban pathologies; however, the “black metropolis” is a metaphor broad enough to cover discussion focusing on positive as well as negative aspects of the black urban experience. The “metropolis” concept in the history of the modernization in the United States views the urban center as being at once an incubus of social ills and an engine driving opportunity, expansion, prosperity, and special accomplishment.

In many respects this metropolis model was reflected in black Cleveland, black Cincinnati, and black Columbus. The size of the black population concentration in each of these urban centers was comparable to that of a large city. In a sense, these were black cities within cities. Actually, they were very large districts with nearly all-black neighborhoods. Growth was the norm in many categories of life in Ohio’s black
metropolises. For instance, as black populations increased, black residential areas, businesses, professions, hospitals, and churches expanded accordingly and in proportions unprecedented in the state. Ohio’s black urban society experienced a measure of the decade’s prosperity, which was spread unevenly, in the form of relative affluence for the business and professional classes and some occupational gains for working people. Meanwhile, African Americans in Ohio industriously constructed urban structures of many kinds, economic, social, cultural, and political. Consequently, Ohio’s black metropolises generally possessed the spectrum of urban institutions found in cities across the state and the nation. This indicates that local people in Ohio’s black neighborhoods saw opportunities and realized them. The most notable achievements were in the building of essentially black cities, each with its wide-ranging institutional structures. Characteristic urban problems, as well as possibilities, existed in Ohio’s black metropolises. These troubles, such as poverty and crime, were complicated by color lines that circumscribed the black neighborhoods. This study shows that African Americans in Ohio cities were not passive in the face of life’s challenges in the twenties, but active and assertive in seizing urban opportunities and in combating urban problems.

Impacted by the black migration of the 1920s, Ohio’s African American urban population grew, reaching unprecedented raw numbers. Black population growth in Ohio occurred largely in major urban centers. In 1930, 72 percent of all black Ohioans lived in cities whose populations were 50,000 or more. Cincinnati, Cleveland, and Columbus each possessed black populations over 30,000 in 1930, and black totals in other Ohio cities exceeded 10,000. (See table A2.) Growth during the 1920s was greatest in northern Ohio’s major urban centers, where black population more than doubled in Cleveland, Toledo, and Youngstown. In the southern area, Dayton’s black population nearly doubled and Cincinnati’s grew by almost three-fifths. In central Ohio, Columbus’ black population grew by almost half, but Springfield’s rose less than two-tenths. African Americans in 1930 were 12 percent or less of the whole population in each large Ohio city. African Americans statewide rose to 309,304, which was 4.7 percent of Ohio’s total population in 1930. (See table A1.)

In the 1920s, as in the past, African American migrants were attracted to Ohio because its social-economic conditions were more favorable than those of the South. An impoverished potential migrant from Houston, Texas, expressed a typical motive of black migrants when he inquired about opportunities in Columbus, Ohio. The Texan asked “whether there be any chance for the man Seeking work and a place for
himself and family to sleep at night with both eyes shut?" He added: "I am a married man, wife and 2 children and wants to locate where my children will have a chance in life to make good and wages is beyond starvation prices of course. No need to tell you of Texas. You are reading."

Historian Peter Gottlieb points out that a spirit of hope was characteristic of black southerners migrating to cities in the East and Midwest during World War I and the 1920s. Economic circumstances in much of this period supported a belief that personal advancement was possible for African Americans who seized the initiative and removed from the South.

The rate of black migration to Ohio evidently rose and fell with the degree of economic opportunity in the state. African American workers in Ohio cities experienced general unemployment as postwar economic readjustments caused a depression in 1921–1922. In times of economic difficulty African Americans were usually the first to lose their jobs. In 1921 a local researcher wrote, "Several factories [in Columbus] have indicated that they expect to reduce the number of negro [sic] workers and employ white workers in their stead."

However, employment of black workers was relatively high in Ohio between 1922 and 1927. The economy of the state and the nation expanded during this era of business and industrial prosperity. Moreover, the Congressional immigration restriction legislation of 1924 sharply cut the flow of immigration and further reduced the supply of foreign-born white workers. These two factors caused a relatively high demand for African American labor. By the summer of 1922 Ohio employers experienced a labor shortage that was filled in part by black workers. During the summer of 1922, approximately fifteen hundred African Americans from the South migrated to Youngstown and found employment in the steel mills there. Similarly, in June 1923 an African American journalist observed, "Owing to the shortage of labor a number of our people are still migrating from the South to Cleveland."

Almost two-fifths of the job applicants placed in work by the Negro Welfare Association of Cleveland in 1923 had been in the city only two months.

Business prosperity in Ohio, as in the country as a whole, continued until near the end of the twenties. Marginal labor was adversely affected as the economic expansion began to level off in the second half of the decade and the introduction of improved industrial technology reduced the need for manual labor. In Columbus, according to one observer, "The depression for marginal labor, especially colored labor, set in as early as 1927."

In 1926 Cleveland George A. Myers noted that black migration to Cleveland was "on the wane, the demand for labor not being so great as it was for the past few years."

In October 1927 thousands of
African Americans in Cleveland were reportedly unemployed. Thus, black workers began to experience economic difficulty even before the financial disaster of 1929 and the Great Depression that followed it.

During the 1920s black newcomers in Ohio cities, like migrants in earlier times, were required to make a difficult adjustment to urban life in hard circumstances. Obtaining employment and income, at least in the decade’s flush years, was often less problematical than finding adequate lodgings. Many African American migrants to Ohio cities were crowded in dwellings that were inadequate for human habitation. The causes of the phenomenon were familiar. Racially exclusive policies of many white property owners still limited the number of dwellings available for occupancy by African Americans. The wartime shortage of new housing continued to exist nationwide into the 1920s. Migrant families and individuals with meager incomes shared rooms with others because separately they could not pay the relatively high rent for scarce housing space in African American areas. During the 1920s shortages of housing were noted across Ohio from Cincinnati to Toledo. Cincinnati Better Housing League information, published in 1926, said: “So as far as new housing goes nothing has been done for the colored population except the [few] houses built by the Model Homes Company [prior to 1920].”

In Cincinnati, housing options were further limited when private urban redevelopment enterprises in the Basin area cleared old dwellings available to blacks for the construction of business and club edifices. The Cincinnati Better Housing League reported at mid-decade that Cincinnati’s West End was “a highly congested area built up with tenement and business houses, factories and railroads.”

Generally the housing open to black migrants in Ohio was old, dilapidated, and comparatively expensive as well as overcrowded. Systematic surveys of African American dwelling units in Columbus indicated that housing conditions of blacks there were far below the average for that city. Despite the inadequate character of rental housing accessible to African Americans in Ohio, blacks were required to pay exceptionally high rental rates. The editor of the Cleveland Gazette noted: “. . . our people of this section [of Cleveland] pay higher rent proportionately, for the worst living quarters in the city, than is paid by members of other groups in other sections of the city.” Comparing housing costs of black and white tenants in Cincinnati, the city’s Better Housing League indicated: “Negro tenants pay higher rent for similar accommodations.” The wartime rent profiteering phenomenon continued into the 1920s. In Cincinnati the average rental of tenement flats occupied by black families increased from approximately four dollars per room per month in 1918 to over seven dollars per room per month in 1925.
Contemporaries recognized the connection between high housing costs and residential congestion. In 1922 housing problems created "almost desperate" circumstances for black families in Cincinnati, according to the local Better Housing League. In 1923 a league worker reported that 94 people were occupying 12 rooms in a George Street tenement in Cincinnati's African American West End.\(^\text{25}\) In 1925 Clark L. Mack, Labor Commissioner, Cleveland Chamber of Commerce, reported: "High and exorbitant rents are frequently being charged colored people in certain sections of the city [Cleveland] resulting in overcrowding and the spread of disease."\(^\text{26}\) Commenting on serious overcrowding in African American areas of Cleveland in 1926, City Health Commissioner Harvey L. Rockwood noted that there were single dwelling units in Cleveland that were occupied by fifteen to twenty people.\(^\text{27}\)

Many African Americans residing in Ohio cities during the 1920s were exposed to various social problems that were historically endemic in urban areas where low-income people occupied residential housing that was old, deteriorating, and overcrowded. Among them were serious public health hazards. Ohio public health officials reported that poor housing conditions disproportionately threatened the physical well being of African Americans. The Cincinnati Health Commissioner, Dr. W. H. Peters, asserted that "bad housing" was "the chief predisposing factor" contributing to extraordinary ill health among blacks in Cincinnati during the early 1920s. His statement, published in a 1925 issue of Cincinnati Sanitary Bulletin, noted that African Americans contributed more than their "quota to the death toll of Cincinnati from practically every important cause of death."\(^\text{28}\) Infant mortality per 1,000 births was greater for blacks in Cincinnati. Almost three times as many black children as white infants died within their birth year. Peters also reported: "As compared to the white race, over four times as many colored people die of tuberculosis per 1,000 of population."\(^\text{29}\) Regarding Cincinnati deaths from all causes, the black morality rate was almost double the white death rate per 1,000 persons in 1924.\(^\text{30}\) Cleveland Health Commissioner Rockwood made similar points about the effects of overcrowded housing in a paper, "Effect of Negro Migration on Community Health in Cleveland," presented to the National Conference on Social Work in 1926. Rockwood stated that the death rate among blacks in Cleveland increased 80 percent from 1920 to 1926 while the death rate among other Clevelanders remained nearly stable for the same period.\(^\text{31}\) According to statewide vital statistics Ohio mortality rates were still about 70 percent higher for blacks than whites in 1930, respectively 18.8 and 11.1 deaths per 1,000 persons. Death rates and presumably health status improved marginally.
Likewise, crime threatened African American residential areas that became increasingly congested as black migration to Ohio cities continued during the 1920s. Crime reached new levels in some African American sections of Cincinnati, Cleveland, and Columbus by mid-decade. Writing in 1926, Cincinnati black weekly editor Wendell P. Dabney said: “Queen City crime runs riot as never before, and in the ‘Black Belt,’ that is, the ‘downtown tenderloin’ district, vice . . . rears its hideous head. . . .” He observed, for instance, that prostitution still was being practiced openly in many downtown public places in this district. Further, Dabney lamented, “The proportion of colored criminals [in Cincinnati] is appalling.” The causes were evident to him. In previous years thousands of black migrants from the “most benighted southern counties” had settled in Cincinnati. He explained: “They crowded into the tenements, already over full, . . . in the West End. Walnut Hills and the suburbs, the habitat of very reputable [black] families had no room for these refugees. The terrible congestion brought both sexes of all ages together. . . . The glaring poverty . . ., permeated all phases of daily existence, intensifying its horrors, furnishing ever-insistent incentive to theft or harlotry.” In addition to difficult living conditions, Dabney said that the sources of crime in impoverished black residential areas were the liquor trade and lax law enforcement caused by political influences.

Crime increased in Cleveland neighborhoods where black migrants were crowded together. For example, one issue of an African American weekly reported several murders committed in the area of Central and Scovill Avenues during the previous weekend. Putting the incidents in context, the Cleveland Gazette’s report noted: “‘Speakeasies,’ ‘Bootleggers,’ ‘dope sellers,’ prostitutes, gamblers, loafers, etc., are so numerous and work so openly and brazenly that it is not at all strange that here of late practically every Saturday and Sunday are almost as bloody days, with many crimes, as there were last Saturday and Sunday. They yell, curse and swear, using the vilest of language with the greatest impunity in the public highways at anytime of the day or night, and in the hearing of women and children, too and little or no effort is made to stop them. It seems as if the police fear to say much if anything to them.” Others, including Cleveland Councilman Peter Witt, believed that inadequate policing contributed to the growth of crime in some black districts. Witt, who several years earlier had been special assistant to Progressive Mayor Tom L. Johnson, excoriated Cleveland city officials for the lawlessness in the largely black third police precinct. This white councilman stated: “The vicious and criminal element operates in the ‘Roaring Third’ precinct through the connivance of city authorities. The
'Roaring Third' does not mean that the great majority of people in the district are vicious, but that the criminals are suffered to operate there.\footnote{36}

Statistics drawn from police and court records in the 1920s showed relatively high crime rates in Ohio's black urban communities while migration from the South was ongoing. Although the police rarely interfered with the various illicit vice enterprises in black urban areas, a disproportionate number of African Americans in Ohio were arrested, convicted, and sentenced. Undoubtedly, worsening housing conditions in some black neighborhoods contributed to social disorganization and crime; however, the crime statistics among African Americans also reflected evident racial bias in the Ohio criminal justice system. A disproportionate number of blacks were arrested and sentenced. In both Cincinnati and Cleveland, the percentage of black youngsters committed to juvenile detention homes was significantly greater than the black proportion of the city's population.\footnote{37} In Columbus, the juvenile delinquency rate among African American youngsters was the highest of any ethnic group there.\footnote{38} Among those arrested in Cincinnati, blacks were more likely to receive jail sentences than whites. The disparity was evidenced in statistics on the “Number of Arrests, 1920 to October 1, 1925,” provided by the Cincinnati Police Department. In an average year during that time blacks composed about 17 percent of the arrests in Cincinnati, but blacks comprised approximately 47 percent of those sentenced to jail from June 1924 to June 1925.\footnote{39} Meanwhile, African Americans were about 11 percent of Cincinnati's population. In criminal courts across the state, proportionately more blacks than whites faced incarceration. In 1930, when African Americans were 4.7 percent of state’s population, blacks were 23.8 percent of all prisoners received from Ohio courts.\footnote{40}

The social-economic problems accompanying the black migration to Ohio in the 1920s received more public attention than the movement's positive effects. The enlargement of black populations was fundamental to economic, social, cultural, and political advances in Ohio's African American urban communities during the decade. A black community capable of supporting a broad institutional life existed in each of several Ohio urban centers by 1930. Increasing numbers of employed persons further raised aggregate income in black communities. Although severely restricted by racial bias, upward occupational mobility boosted incomes of some African Americans. The resulting growth of the African American consumer markets in Ohio cities fostered the continued expansion of black business and professional classes. Also during the 1920s, unprecedented numbers of black institutions, especially churches, were founded with the financial support of black working people.
In Ohio during the 1920s African Americans’ group purchasing power rose with the increasing number of black Ohioans earning wages and salaries. Gainfully employed black men and women increased from 99,193 to 145,379 between 1920 and 1930. The improved occupational status of black Ohioans also increased the group’s combined income. The percentage of employed black males working in industrial occupations in the 1920s was well above the prewar figure. In Cleveland, almost half of the employed black males were in manufacturing and mechanical industries in 1930, while only about a fifth of the men were in domestic and personal service jobs. Meanwhile, in Columbus and Cincinnati about 40 to 45 percent of employed black men worked in those industries. In Ohio industries, a larger proportion of blacks worked in semiskilled and skilled positions than before the war. In exceptional instances, Ohio industry employed African American workers in white-collar and supervisory positions as well as in skilled and semiskilled jobs. Cleveland’s Negro Welfare Association placed six personnel workers and eight foremen in local industries in 1920. In Cleveland, scores of black women operated power machines in the plants of the Liberty Garment Company and the Manual Products Company. In 1921 the Jeffrey Manufacturing Company of Columbus employed an African American, Harry Alexander, in its bookkeeping department. Even so, most black industrial workers in the state were employed in unskilled labor occupations. In 1930, 80 percent of black male industrial workers in Cincinnati were in the unskilled labor category, while the like figure was 65 percent in Columbus and 61 percent in Cleveland.

African American occupational gains made in Ohio during World War I were maintained during the 1920s, but they were somewhat eroded. The proportions of employed black males in skilled occupations, in semiskilled work, and in unskilled labor in Ohio industry were less favorable to African Americans in 1930 than in 1920. The occupational standing of black Ohioans, however, was considerably higher in 1930 than in 1910. In Cleveland, for example, the proportion of employed black men occupied in manufacturing and mechanical industries grew from 22 percent in 1910 to 48 percent in 1930, and the actual number of black male industrial workers rose from 755 to 12,121.

While African Americans experienced some upward occupational mobility in the 1920s, domestic and personal service work was still a significant source of income for black Ohioans, especially females. The proportion of employed black males working in domestic and personal service increased marginally in major Ohio cities. About a fifth of the employed black men in Cleveland held domestic and personal service
jobs in 1930. Traditionally, African American women in Ohio were largely restricted to domestic and personal service occupations. A relatively high percentage of employed black women worked in industry during World War I, but those gains were lost in the next decade. The proportion of employed black females working in industry was smaller in 1930 than in 1910. Conversely, the percentage of black working females with domestic and personal service jobs was larger in 1930 than in 1910. In Cincinnati 90 percent of employed black women were domestic and personal service workers in 1930. At the same time, over 121,000 black women were working and earning incomes in Ohio.49

Black occupational gains in the state after 1910 were marginal because the Ohio color line in employment was still much in effect. White owners and managers of commercial enterprises remained least inclined to employ African Americans. Influential black Clevelander George A. Myers reported an example of that form of racial discrimination in 1926. He wrote: “We have many . . . graduates of High Schools and Colleges, capable of office, banking and other commercial opportunities, but like every avenue which leads to the good, are closed in the face of negro [sic] youth. . . . There is not a bank in Cleveland that employs any of our group as a clerk, teller or bookkeeper, scarcely an office that uses any as clerks or stenographers and no stores, though our business runs up in the millions; [sic] that employ any as sales-women, salesmen or clerks.”50 African Americans largely obtained occupations in commerce through self-employment or employment in black businesses.

Black migration during the 1920s boosted business in black commercial districts founded before the war, for example, Central Avenue in Cleveland, Fifth Street in Cincinnati, and East Long Street in Columbus. Black-owned business also developed in newer black neighborhoods of Ohio cities. In contrast to prewar times when the black population was much smaller, there were enough black consumers to support relatively large numbers of African American enterprises by 1930. Commenting on local black business activity in 1922, Columbus Urban League executive secretary Nimrod B. Allen said: “There are nearly one hundred business enterprises on East Long Street and vicinity, embracing haberdasheries, photographers, optometrists, music shops, music studios, beauty parlors, printing establishments, corporations, tailors, etc.”51 Writing in Cincinnati at mid-decade, black weekly editor Wendell P. Dabney observed: “. . . [W]e have hundreds of business houses. A multiplicity of certain kinds, a scarcity of others. Naturally those necessitating small capital . . . are the most numerous.” He indicated that the more successful black enterprises in Cincinnati were barbershops, beauty parlors, restaurants, lodging houses, undertaking establishments and a chain
of drug stores. In 1926 local African American civic leader George A. Myers listed and discussed types of black businesses in Cleveland. Building construction, insurance, and finance companies were noted. Myers also referred to “A few small stores and several very prosperous Undertakers and Real Estate Dealers.” Actually Myers understated the magnitude of Cleveland retail stores owned by African Americans. According to the census bureau there were 215 Cleveland stores “operated by Negro proprietors” in 1929. The total payroll of these stores was $108,666 and their total net sales were over a million dollars.

The 1920s black migration expanded potential subscriber pools of black weekly newspapers in Ohio cities. This enabled proprietors of well-established black newspapers to continue in business through the decade and motivated other African Americans to start new weeklies. Although readership grew in the twenties, black weeklies were still financially challenged and only the fittest survived. Among the prewar black weeklies that continued publication through the twenties were editor Wendell P. Dabney’s Cincinnati Union and editor John Rives’s Dayton Forum. William B. Johnson published and edited the Black and White Chronicle in Akron from 1924 into 1930. Black newspapers published for two years or less in the twenties included the Cincinnati Optimist, the Springfield Informer, and the Akron Informer. Short-lived black weeklies published in Columbus late in the decade were the Columbus Weekly News, the Ohio Recorder, the Columbus Voice, and the Ohio Torch.

Cleveland produced more sustained black newspaper enterprises than any other Ohio city in the 1920s. Harry C. Smith maintained continuous publication of the Cleveland Gazette during the decade. The Gazette sometimes competed with as many as three local black weeklies in the 1920s. The Cleveland Advocate was published from World War I to 1922. The Cleveland Call was founded in 1920 by Garrett A. Morgan as an advertising medium for his business involving the manufacturing and sales of hair and beauty products. Also in 1920, the Cleveland Post started publication as the voice of a black fraternal organization. Published intermittently, these new weeklies were financially disappointing. Ormande O. Forte, former editor of the defunct Cleveland Advocate, reentered the competition by founding the Cleveland Herald in 1924. The Herald was published irregularly during the rest of the decade. Attempting to survive this competition, the owners of the Post and the Cleveland Call pooled their resources by merging their weeklies in 1926. The new Cleveland Call and Post was not financially successful until the 1930s. Remarkably, the Gazette, the Herald, and the Call and Post existed in Cleveland at decade’s end.
In line with a prewar and wartime trend, Ohio’s new African American enterprises catered to blacks rather than whites in the 1920s. The postwar decade saw further decline of the old style black businesses providing personal services to white patrons. In the previous century, successful black businesses usually relied on white patronage. In time more whites entered the personal service business and acquired a larger share of its white clientele. In 1930 black tailors, barbers, and food caterers with white clienteles were exceptional in Ohio. In Cincinnati, white hotels provided food-catering services for large social events of the kind previously handled by financially successful black caterers. Some African Americans, who were former hotel cooks and waiters, made minimal profits by catering smaller affairs like house parties. A few of Cincinnati’s older black food caterers, including Edith Fossett Miller, maintained profitable businesses into the 1920s. Many of Cincinnati’s old and wealthy white families employed the Fossett catering services for generations. This Cincinnati family was descended from the Fossetts who were in charge of Thomas Jefferson’s Monticello kitchens and dining room.

Hundreds of African American barbers served black patrons in Ohio during the 1920s. Unlike prewar times in Ohio, there were very few black barbershops frequented by whites in 1930. Still patronized by whites in 1926, Skillman’s barbershop in Cincinnati was exceptional. It was one of the few remaining black barbershops occupying high rent buildings in downtown Cincinnati. Skillman’s location on lower Vine Street previously accommodated the large shop of Fountain Lewis, Jr., who learned the barbering trade from his father. In earlier times, Fountain Lewis, Sr.’s shop in Cincinnati was “the great resort of bankers and aristocrats,” according to Wendell P. Dabney, who noted, “Grant, Lincoln and other famous dignitaries were soothed into slumber by the rhythmic music of his scissors.” Black barbers received little competition from whites in the elder Fountain Lewis’s time. Eventually, in Cincinnati and elsewhere, more whites entered the business, and younger whites were more inclined to patronize white barbers. After years of successful business Fountain Lewis, Jr. closed his large barbershop and joined his son in an undertaking enterprise.

In Cleveland, George A. Myers’s experience reflected changing white attitudes toward African American barbers. Myers was employed in a Cleveland hotel barbershop in 1879 when he was a young man. Backed by prominent white men in 1888, Myers became the owner of the new Hollenden Hotel’s barbershop. Offering the most modern facilities and outstanding service, Myers’ shop was reputed as a fashionable place in one of the city’s major hotels. Local and visiting dignitaries including some famous persons, such as Marcus Hanna, patronized the Hollenden
barbershop. In 1920 Myers employed 35 barbers, hairstylists for women, manicurists, podiatrists, porters, and cashiers. When Myers announced his retirement plans in 1930, the hotel management informed him that the barbershop's African American staff would be replaced with whites after his departure.61 Also in 1930, the prominent black Cleveland Charles W. Chesnutt wrote: “The increase in white barbershops [in Cleveland] has almost put the Negro barber out of business, so far as white patronage is concerned, and the Barber's Union, in which no Negro is admitted to membership, has been trying to complete their ruin by proposing a state barbers' licensing law, requiring examination and acceptance by a committee dominated by the union.”62

Black undertaking businesses grew in Ohio during the 1920s when African American families ordinarily used the services of black undertakers. In 1926 local weekly editor Wendell P. Dabney wrote: “Over a half century ago, when Negroes died [in Cincinnati], white undertakers buried them. Now very rarely does any white undertaker bury a colored person.”63 Greater black mortality naturally followed the extraordinary black in-migration and the African American population growth in Ohio after 1915. More black families needed funeral services, and new black undertaking firms met that demand in Ohio cities. African American funeral businesses expanded most in urban centers with the largest black populations. In Cleveland, J. Walter Wills’ “House of Wills” and nine other black funeral homes employed 32 African American undertakers in 1930. Wills undoubtedly was the most enterprising and financially successful black funeral home proprietor in Cleveland and perhaps in the state during the decade. There were considerably more African American funeral homes in Cleveland, Cincinnati, and Columbus than in other Ohio cities. In 1930, five black undertakers were employed in Dayton.64

In Cincinnati, many blacks entered the funeral business early in the decade once African American deaths in the city increased sharply, rising from 674 to 921 during 1920–1923. Seventeen black undertakers served there in 1926. Relative newcomers to Cincinnati were among those who formed new black undertaking businesses in the city. Former school principal Inez Renfro and United States postal employee St. Julian Renfro came to Cincinnati from the South in 1913. This married couple entered business together as funeral directors in 1922 when he finished training at the Cincinnati College of Embalming. Another wedded pair, Ruth H. Walker and Leroy J. Walker, also opened a funeral home in 1922. Born in North Carolina, the Walkers moved to Cincinnati in 1914 and eventually enrolled in the Cincinnati College of Embalming. After passing the state board's
examination, they were certified as Class A embalmers in 1920. Some new black undertakers were older veterans of successful businesses in Cincinnati. Fountain Lewis, Jr., the former proprietor of a large downtown barbershop, invested in his son Fred’s undertaking venture. Walter S. Houston, an experienced grocer who owned Cincinnati property valued at $50,000, also launched a new black funeral establishment early in the decade.\textsuperscript{65}

In 1930 Ohio’s new black retail businesses were in black neighborhoods, and with few exceptions their customers were African Americans. The wartime expansion of African American retail stores continued during the 1920s, but at a somewhat slower rate. Between 1920 and 1930 the number of black retail dealers more than doubled in Cleveland, growing 35 percent in Cincinnati and 13 percent in Columbus. The dramatic transformation of black retail business in Cleveland was most graphically indicated by the growth of the actual number of black retail dealers from 28 in 1910 to 286 in 1930.\textsuperscript{66} In Ohio statewide, black proprietors operated 790 stores with about \$400,000.00 in total payroll and over \$4,400,000.00 in total net sales in 1929.\textsuperscript{67}

During the 1920s African Americans in Ohio entered the real estate business in greater numbers than ever before. Continuing black migration to Ohio cities maintained a high demand for housing in traditionally African American neighborhoods and their vicinities. Between 1920 and 1930 the numbers of black real estate agents and officials quadrupled in Cincinnati, tripled in Columbus, and doubled in Cleveland. In 1930 there were 39 black realtors in Cleveland, 18 in Columbus, and 14 in Cincinnati.\textsuperscript{68} Since real estate clients needed financial assistance in the purchase of homes, some black entrepreneurs were associated with both mortgage granting companies and realty firms. The most enterprising African American then in Cleveland undoubtedly was Herbert Chauncey, a Georgia native, who acquired a license to practice law in Ohio. Supported by local African American investors, Herbert Chauncey organized a savings bank and a real estate company in Cleveland. Likewise Chauncey established an insurance company and a weekly newspaper, the Cleveland Post.\textsuperscript{69} Born in Covington, Kentucky, Horace Sudduth was a prominent African American civic leader in Cincinnati and a successful entrepreneur. He was the owner of the Sudduth Real Estate Agency and president of a savings association owned by African Americans in Cincinnati.\textsuperscript{70}

New black-owned savings banks in Ohio were a welcome alternative to white-owned banks that practiced racial discrimination in making home mortgage loans. It was, however, the growing numbers of potential African American savers and credit consumers that most impelled the
proliferation of black savings and loan associations in Ohio during the 1920s. In the decades before World War I, when the black population was relatively small, African American banking enterprises in Ohio usually were short lived. The Star Building and Loan Association of Toledo was Ohio's only African American banking institution when it was incorporated in 1913. Several black financial enterprises appeared in Ohio after the war. Organized by Herbert S. Chauncey and other black investors in 1919, Cleveland's Empire Building and Loan Association prospered during the 1920s as the value of its deposits, capital stock, and assets grew. Meanwhile the Cleveland Finance Company existed under black ownership. In 1922 African Americans in Columbus owned the Credential Mortgage Company, the Adelphi Loan and Savings Company, and the Columbus Industrial Mortgage and Security Company. African Americans in Cincinnati, including Horace Sudduth, established the Industrial Savings and Loan Company. Black investors also started the East End Investment and Loan Company in Cincinnati. Each maintained a branch office in Cincinnati's Walnut Hills area as well as a main office in 1926. Late in the decade, African Americans in Akron formed the People's System Finance Company.

New African American insurance businesses also appeared in Ohio during the 1920s. Formed in 1919, Columbus' Supreme Life and Casualty Insurance Company was the most ambitious black insurance firm in the state during the decade. In 1922 Supreme Life extended its operations in Ohio and entered insurance markets in West Virginia, Arkansas, and the District of Columbia. In 1928 the Columbus-based insurance company purchased a building in Cincinnati and opened a branch office there. The Anchor Life Insurance Company, another black enterprise, existed in Cleveland by 1926. Some insurance agents in Ohio represented out-of-state African American enterprises, including the Columbian Fraternal Association. These black ventures hired African Americans to sell insurance; consequently the number of black insurance agents in Ohio increased sharply between 1920 and 1930, from 8 to 95 in Cleveland, 2 to 29 in Cincinnati, and 8 to 26 in Columbus. Major black insurance companies in Chicago and Atlanta during this period are subjects of recent book length studies.

The widening scope of black commerce was accompanied by the rising importance of African American business associations in Ohio during the 1920s. Relative newcomers as well as long-time Ohio residents contributed to these African American business activities. Writing in 1922, Columbus Urban League executive secretary Nimrod B. Allen stated: 'Columbus' Negro citizens have made very noticeable and rapid progress within the last few years. The citizens credit this progress to the
influx of Southern Negroes . . . who were used to being in business for themselves.\textsuperscript{81} Recent scholarship calls attention to the success of black business enterprises in the South prior to World War I.\textsuperscript{82} Newcomers contributed much to the Business and Professional Men’s Club that was affiliated with Columbus’ black YMCA Spring Street branch. According to Allen, the club was meant to offer black businessmen what the Kiwanis and Rotary gave to whites. It met weekly and, according to Allen, was “addressed by men of affairs in and out of Columbus” who inspired members to take actions that were responsible for much black business progress in Columbus. An insurance company, finance companies, and other enterprises grew out of the club’s network of black businessmen.\textsuperscript{83}

Elsewhere, energetic entrepreneur Herbert S. Chauncey successfully led an effort to organize the Cleveland Business Men’s Association in 1925. The Cincinnati Business Men’s Association already existed in 1926 when the Akron Negro Business League was organized.\textsuperscript{84} Black professional groups in Ohio were greatly enlarged under the impetus of the black in-migration during the 1920s and the consequent African American population growth in the state. Ohio’s black clergymen, teachers, physicians, and lawyers devoted their services almost entirely to the needs of African Americans and saw white clients even less often than in the recent past. Black professional classes expanded at high rates between 1920 and 1930; however, while there were some exceptions, the growth of black professional groups did not keep up with the increase of black population in Ohio cities. Most black professionals in Ohio were clergymen or teachers, largely women. Increases in the number of black teachers were greater in the downstate cities that maintained schools whose students and staff were all African Americans. Most black ministers served in Ohio’s three largest cities. Black physicians and attorneys also increased at high rates in some Ohio cities, but there were relatively few African American doctors and lawyers anywhere in the state.\textsuperscript{85} (See table A3.)

Although the black business class experienced unparalleled prosperity in Ohio during the 1920s, its gains were relative and limited. Expressing the optimism of the decade, local Urban League officer Nimrod B. Allen asserted: “it is no wild fancy to predict that the next generation will find a score or more of Negroes of real wealth from business accumulations on [Columbus’] East Long Street; even now [1922] we have those who count their monthly incomes in the thousands.”\textsuperscript{86} Yet, only in comparison with the precarious existence of the black business and professional communities in prewar years could the situation in the 1920s be regarded as progress. Two prominent African American elders in Cleveland, George A. Myers and Charles W. Chesnutt, were well
aware of the extraordinary proliferation of black enterprises, but they saw these gains in the context of citywide business. In Cleveland, the role of “the Negro in business” was “limited” in 1926, according to Myers. For example, Cleveland’s African American insurance and finance companies were, Myers noted, “all conducted by earnest and honest men, but handicapped by lack of capital and the confidence of the masses.”

In 1930 Chesnutt wrote: “The development of business among Negroes in Cleveland has been backward, for obvious reasons—the lack of capital, experience and inherited business attitude.”

Similarly, most African American businesses in Cincinnati were based on small capital investments in 1926, according to local black weekly editor Wendell P. Dabney. He stated: “There are no big colored groceries or general stores.”

Explaining the phenomenon, Dabney indicated that lower prices and advertising attracted many black patrons to larger groceries and retail stores owned by whites, who achieved economies of scale and advertised effectively.

Likewise, African Americans in professional life made relative gains in Ohio during the 1920s. In Cincinnati black teachers earned salaries remarkably higher than those of their counterparts in the past, while black physicians and dentists also experienced comparative opulence. “Our professional men and women are doing well, more doctors, lawyers and teachers than ever before in the history of the city [Cincinnati],” said Wendell P. Dabney, who also noted, “The colored professions do not enjoy so much white patronage as in earlier days.”

In this decade, black professionals in Ohio were dependent more than ever on black clients whose incomes were curtailed by color lines in the job market and other factors. Potential black clients were mostly persons employed in manufacturing or domestic jobs. This growing financial reliance of black professionals on black workers was occurring outside Ohio as well. Historian Joe William Trotter, Jr. finds this linkage between a black professional class and a new black working class in southern West Virginia in the period 1915–1930.

The increasing number of black professionals in Ohio intensified competition for black clients, and this further restricted the incomes of some African American professionals, especially in Cleveland. The enlargement of black professional classes in Ohio was greatest there. Commenting on black professionals in 1926, George A. Myers said that there was in Cleveland a “superabundance of doctors, dentists and lawyers, which of necessity makes a survival of the fittest, and a meager living for the many.”

African American churches were the greatest institutional beneficiaries of Ohio’s black in-migration during the 1920s. Black church mem-
bership, congregations, clergymen, and buildings increased apace with Ohio’s black population growth. In 1926, there were 119,529 black church members in Ohio, more than double the number in 1916. Often membership rose rapidly in new black churches. In Cincinnati the New Hope Baptist Church was organized with 16 members in 1922, and its membership grew to 580 within three years. Like most black church members in Ohio before 1916, the majority of African American newcomers were Baptists. In 1926 African American church membership in Ohio included 74,048 Baptists and 36,591 Methodists, while another 8,890 black church members were Adventists, Presbyterians, Episcopalians, Roman Catholics, and affiliates of several other church bodies. Between 1916 and 1926, the number of black church congregations in Ohio rose from 392 to 622.

During the 1920s expanding black congregations in Ohio were housed in buildings ranging from large and costly traditional church edifices to low-rent rooms in various kinds of structures. In Ohio’s great urban centers, small black congregations composed of recent migrants worshiped in stores and other rented buildings that were not constructed as churches. In his brief history of African Americans in Columbus, J. S. Himes, Jr. commented: “In some instances entire congregations, pastor, members and ritual, migrated to Columbus and set up church in . . . an empty store building, a vacant dwelling, or an abandoned church edifice.” Feeling unwelcome, some other migrants left formal black churches in Columbus to join an existing storefront congregation or to form another newcomers’ church. In Cleveland, the members of Zion Hill Baptist Church were black migrants who came from Alabama as a group headed by the Reverend Charles C. Ailer. Many black migrant congregations using untraditional structures in Cleveland were found on Scovill Avenue and Central Avenue. In Cincinnati the Holiness Assembly Church, the Spiritualist Church of God, and similar black churches conducted services that undoubtedly were attractive to some nostalgic newcomers. In ways familiar to natives of the rural South their religious services touched emotions while providing the supports of friendships and kinships. Black migrant churches surely comforted many lonely rural newcomers while they became accustomed to living in Ohio cities.

The storefront church phenomenon in the 1920s was overshadowed by the great increase of church buildings owned by African American congregations in Ohio. In the wake of in-migration to Ohio and the prosperity of the decade, black congregations usually included more members and many with higher incomes than in the past. Those new circumstances enabled African Americans to finance the purchase of existing church buildings or the construction of new ones. African Americans
rarely built new churches because church buildings often stood vacant in Ohio’s expanding black urban districts. Numerous white congregations that vacated churches in Ohio’s racially changing neighborhoods were agreeable to selling their old church properties to African Americans. In Cleveland most black congregations that were in the market for church property were able to acquire church edifices previously used by whites; consequently, few new African American churches were built there.99 Similar circumstances existed in Columbus, where the number of church edifices owned by African Americans increased from less than twenty before 1915 to about 100 in 1931. In his account of African American life in Columbus, J. S. Himes, Jr. said that only about a half dozen of those 80 additional black church buildings were new constructions. Himes explained: “. . . colored congregations bought, often at fabulous prices, church buildings abandoned by white congregations who moved out in the face of the swelling tide of color.”100 Although exceptional, new churches financed by black congregations were built in Ohio in the 1920s. Generally, the members of those congregations were either unusually numerous or relatively affluent. Often the black pastors who led church building campaigns were themselves migrants with impressive ministerial credentials. In Cincinnati the Antioch Baptist Church was the largest black congregation, and its membership grew as black in-migration proceeded. In 1923 The Reverend W. Henry Williams, D.D. was called to Antioch Baptist Church with a mandate to build a new edifice. An alumnus of Kentucky’s Simmons University, he had received an honorary doctorate from Selma University in recognition of his long and successful Baptist pastorates in Somerset and Owensboro, Kentucky. Starting in 1925, Antioch Baptist erected a Gothic style brick and stone church with an auditorium seating two thousand people. Costing over $200,000, the new building included offices, library, kitchen, dining room, social hall, and gymnasium. At the same time, the congregation of Cincinnati’s Mt. Zion Methodist Episcopal Church constructed a house of worship with an attached community house costing $110,000 in all. The pastor in charge of this building campaign was a thirty-five year old native of New York City, The Reverend Stanley E. Grannum, who was a Wesleyan University (Connecticut) A. B., Boston University Graduate School, S. T. B., and former pastor of black churches in Boston and New York City. The new Mt. Zion M. E. Church was located in Walnut Hills, which was the residence of many of Cincinnati’s financially successful African Americans.101 The rising number and value of church buildings owned by Ohio’s black congregations were measures of the demographic and economic
growth of African Americans in Ohio after the start of the great wartime black migration. Between 1916 and 1926 the value of church edifices owned by African Americans in Ohio rose from $2,237,987 to $9,113,989, while the number of those properties increased from 367 to 523. Expansion during these years allowed many black congregations to finance the purchase or the construction of church edifices, but the resulting increase of church indebtedness made the same congregations more vulnerable to financial pressures and possible hard times in future. This phenomenon was most pronounced in Cleveland, Cincinnati, and Columbus but also occurred in other major Ohio cities including Akron. J. S. Himes, Jr., pointed out that the “financial difficulties of Negro churches” in Columbus and in other cities constituted a noteworthy dimension of the black experience in this growth period.

The effects of the continuing black migration to Ohio in this decade invigorated organized African American social life outside of churches. During the 1920s, as in the past, blacks and whites with business and professional backgrounds still participated in separate fraternal associations. These orders were in the early stages of a long-term decline. They were being undermined by competition from motion pictures, radio, and other newer social life alternatives. Nevertheless, Ohio’s separate black and white fraternal associations remained robust throughout the decade. Most of the black orders then existing in Ohio were established much earlier, some in the nineteenth century. They included the Masons, Odd Fellows, Knights of Pythias, Elks, and United Brothers of Friendship.

The Prince Hall Grand Lodge of Free and Accepted Masons of the State of Ohio was founded in 1848. Eventually, its lodges existed throughout the state, and in some places there were proportionately as many black Masons as white ones. Although they were relatively less numerous than that, black Masons were active in Ohio during the 1920s. They were present in the state’s small cities as well as in its large urban centers. For example, black Masons in Cleveland, Canton, and Newark, respectively, hosted the 75th through the 77th annual meetings of the Grand Lodge of Ohio. Sometimes new black lodges were opened in the state during the decade. In 1920 black Masons chartered Cleveland’s William T. Boyd Lodge. In 1922 black Masons planned to build a temple in Columbus at 19th and Long Streets, where they had recently purchased land. In 1926 eleven lodges, chapters, and other black Masonic bodies existed in Cincinnati. Often vocationally successful African Americans in Cincinnati were members of Masonic orders. A large proportion of Cincinnati’s black physicians belonged to a Masonic order and to one or more other black fraternal associations in the 1920s.

African Americans in Ohio conducted separate social activities in
other fraternal associations and in a variety of social clubs, civic organizations, and women’s clubs in the 1920s. In Cincinnati there were ten Knights of Pythias bodies among well over a hundred lodges, chapters, temples, and other such affiliates of black fraternal organizations in 1926. Some African American social organizations were prosperous as well as active. Black Odd Fellows owned property including an impressive lodge hall on West Ninth Street in Cincinnati and a three-story building at Garfield Avenue and Long Street in Columbus. In 1925 the Cincinnati Federation of Women’s Clubs purchased a fine Victorian Era brick mansion on Chapel Street and fitted it out as a clubhouse. Meantime, Cincinnati’s many black men’s clubs, such as the Argus Club, possessed no property. These men’s clubs held their monthly or annual gatherings in private homes. However, members of the Crescent Club, whose members included black weekly editor Wendell P. Dabney, leased clubrooms in Cincinnati’s Sterling Hotel.  

Altruism was commonly practiced by the separate organizations involved in African American social life in Ohio during the 1920s. Black weekly editor Dabney observed that scores of black fraternal lodges in Cincinnati were “doing well in the field of charity.” Black women’s groups were characteristically identified with altruistic causes. Often black women’s clubs attracted middle class persons interested in social work. Mrs. Mamie Trotter, for example, was Lady Manager of the Colored Orphan Asylum and Parliamentarian of the Cincinnati Federation of Women’s Clubs. Mrs. Estelle Rickman Davis served as President of the Ohio Federation of Women’s Clubs in the early 1920s and as an officer of Cincinnati’s YWCA West End Branch, Home for Aged Colored Women, and Union Baptist Church Missionary Society.  

In summary, black Columbus, black Cincinnati, and black Cleveland became African American metropolises in the 1920s. These great black populations were comparable in size to that of a large city, ranging from 30,000 to 70,000. Each black metropolis possessed urban establishments similar to those found in actual cities with tens of thousands in population. Black commercial districts housed many kinds of businesses, such as food catering, barbering, tailoring, saloon keeping, news publishing, undertaking, retailing, insurance, banking, and real estate. African Americans owned and/or managed, staffed, and patronized these institutions. African Americans in each black metropolis offered a gamut of professional services, for example, medical, dental, legal, pedagogical, and pastoral or ministerial services. Various black business and professional associations existed to represent these economic interests. Churches, schools, hospitals, YWCAs, YMCA’s, fraternal orders, women’s clubs, welfare organizations, and equal rights associations
exemplify other kinds of urban structures found in Ohio’s black metropolises. Local people in black Cleveland, black Cincinnati, and black Columbus built these African American cities within cities. While foundations were laid earlier, most of the construction was in the period 1915–1930. The black districts reached metropolis dimensions in the twenties when the growth of black community infrastructure was greater than in any previous decade. This was a decade that saw opportunity, prosperity, and achievement in black metropolises. In contrast to the past, as Charles Dickens said of another age, “It was the best of times, it was the worst of times.” In the twenties black districts in Ohio cities also experienced the intensification of residential congestion, disease, crime, and other characteristically urban problems. At the same time, white intolerance rose to a shrill pitch. As the following chapter shows, the Ohio color line, more divisive than ever, circumscribed and delimited both the positive and negative developments in the black urban experience in this state.