African Americans and the Color Line in Ohio, 1915-1930

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Conclusion

This book discusses the changing experiences of Ohio's black urban communities during 1915-1930, but it is mainly about the color line. Such studies focusing on the past's color lines surely can contribute to understanding of the black experience, but historians must produce additional works that focus on life within Ohio's black communities, rather than on black-white relations; otherwise, comprehension of the African American past will remain incomplete. Kimberly L. Phillips' recent book centering on social-economic class themes within Cleveland's black community helps fill that need. Likewise, Steven C. Tracy's recent volume illuminates the rich history of blues music in Cincinnati. Andrew Cayton's new one-volume Ohio history brings alive early twentieth century black cultural history in pages devoted to the lives, times, and literature of black writers with Ohio experiences who ultimately gained national literary reputations: Charles W. Chesnutt, Paul Lawrence Dunbar, Chester Himes, and Toni Morrison.

Vital social and cultural life existed within black communities, but outside, the color line was always lurking. Ohio's noted black literary figures all addressed it in their works. The color line ran through the music sphere as well. Blues music was one of various musical genres with African roots existing in the United States at this time. The blues was most often performed in nightspots and other places in black districts. Working class blacks valued blues music and identified with it. The sounds of the blues may have been attractive to middle class whites and blacks, but their sensibilities were offended when the blues used rough street words or lyrics about sex, drink, or drugs. Middle class folk, regardless of color, appreciated and enjoyed other music drawing on Africa, like spirituals and jazz, so long as the accompanying lyrics were acceptable by middle class standards. Across the United States the general public in the 1920s heard musical sounds echoing Africa in vaudeville and motion picture houses and at home on radio and on record players.
A Cincinnati blues singer in the 1920s was limited to venues such as local speakeasies. Meantime, a wider audience was possible for John, Jr., Herbert, Harry, and Donald Mills, who were born in Piqua, Ohio, where their father was a barber. Their songs were in tune with middle class sentiments, and their singing performances were entertaining and seductive combinations of harmony and a new jazz sound influenced by their father’s barbershop quartet and black church music. Starting late in the twenties when they were still teenagers, the African American brothers toured on the midwest vaudeville and tent circuit and broadcast on Cincinnati’s WLW radio station. After moving to New York City, the Mills Brothers gained nationwide and life-long fame starting in 1931–1932 when they made big-selling records, performed on national radio broadcasts, and appeared in a motion picture with show business celebrities including Kate Smith, Cab Calloway, and Bing Crosby.

There were statewide dimensions of the Ohio color line and the shadow it cast on the African American experience in the years 1915–1920. Rising intolerance reached new plateaus in every Ohio region, and at the same time local people everywhere stiffened resistance to the color line. This Ohio evidence shows that the segregation of blacks and whites in the social-economic life of this northern state often rivaled that in former slave states of the South where segregation laws, enacted since 1890, required the separation of blacks and whites practically from birth to death. The imposition of segregation in Ohio was less visible and more difficult to challenge on legal grounds than in the South because blacks and whites in Ohio were separated mainly by private acts of racial discrimination and extralegal means. This undoubtedly explains why leaders of the national civil rights movement and historians gave less attention to northern states, like Ohio, than to southern ones when addressing Jim Crow society in this period.

The statewide African American experience in Ohio included, in addition to increased white hostility, black migration to cities, enlargement of black urban populations, growth of black urban community life, and establishment of new organizations confronting urban social welfare and equal rights issues. Each of these was a long-term development that took modern shape in the period 1890–1930, although each had antecedents in the more distant past. These developments took shape in their early stages from the 1890s through 1915, as historian David A. Gerber shows. Evidence for the period 1915–1930 indicates that these trends accelerated significantly during World War I and reached climaxes in the twenties. For example, black migration boosted Cleveland’s African American population from 8,448 in 1910 to 71,899 in 1930. Together, the culmination of these trends in the twenties was the forma-
tion of an African American “metropolis” in each of three Ohio urban centers located across the state from the Ohio River to Lake Erie. Large all-black districts within Cleveland, Cincinnati, and Columbus in 1930 possessed many of the characteristics of a city, populations in the tens of thousands and broad ranges of modern urban institutions, economic, social, and cultural in nature. Black populations in other Ohio cities, such as Akron, Dayton, Toledo, and Youngstown, moved toward “metropolis” status but did not reach it by 1930.7

This Ohio discussion speaks to several themes prominent in the generations-long and scholarly discourse about early twentieth century black experiences in the nation. Scholarship has produced an extensive literature on the development of all-black urban districts in the United States then and on associated historical trends including black migration to urban centers. Studies conducted from the late 1890s through the 1940s were largely produced by social scientists including sociologists, political scientists, and economists. Each focused on African Americans in an urban center and on race relations mainly in the current time.8 Historians entered this scholarly endeavor in a major way during the 1960s and 1970s with the emergence of the ghetto school. These historians added greater temporal perspectives by emphasizing the years between 1865 and 1915 that saw developments presaging the rise of all-black urban districts in the United States during the period 1915–1930.9 Historian Joe William Trotter’s insightful essay surveying this literature is recommended to interested readers. In much of the early scholarship based on the “ghetto model,” Trotter observes, African American migrants often seemed to be inert figures directed by uncontrollable historical phenomena.10

The experiences of black and white urban dwellers were altered but not controlled by historical forces that shaped the modern United States. This Ohio research supports the scholarly arguments holding that white immigrants and black migrants in the nation’s cities exercised free will and influenced events. A generation of United States immigration historians, writing since 1960, revealed that European immigrants and their progeny created functional and enduring ethnic subcultures. Earlier immigration scholars often had viewed white ethnics largely as victims of social disorganization in slum districts. The post-1960 scholarship clarified the importance of kinship and community as means that white ethnics effectively used to deal with urban-industrial life in the United States. The reader may consult historical geographer David Ward’s careful 1989 survey covering much of the literature on immigrants and the city, 1840–1925.11 In the late 1980s and 1990s, Joe William Trotter, Kimberley L. Phillips, and other historians researching black migration
to urban centers found that kinship and friendship ties enabled black migrants to actively cope with life in urban-industrial society. They changed the focus of study from black ghetto development to black working-class formation and analyzed the black urban migration as a social process connected to the migrants’ social and cultural origins in the rural South. Such studies emphasizing the race, class, and gender perspective showed that ordinary black migrants were not merely problematical pawns moved about by historical forces on the chessboard of urban-industrial life but were instead active players who shaped their own lives.12

The framing of this Ohio analysis calls special attention to the complexities and the ambiguities of urban life intersected by the color line. It discusses both color line issues and black community themes in many cities. The variety of black experiences is evident when seen from this broad perspective. Narrower views are found in the traditional scholarly literature composed of single-city studies focusing either on race relations or on black community formation. Black urban experiences in the early twentieth century were notably different from place to place. Among the scholars recently calling attention to these nationwide variations are Kenneth L. Kusmer, Henry Louis Taylor, Jr., and Joe William Trotter, Jr.13

This Ohio study demonstrates that the character of race relations and the shapes of black communities varied from city to city and from region to region within a single state. It shows that in Ohio there were clear regional differences in the intensity of racial intolerance and the strength of protest. The color line was most uniform in southern Ohio and somewhat less so in central Ohio; it was more yielding in northern Ohio than elsewhere in the state. De facto racial segregation in public places, for example, was less common in cities of the northern region than those to the south. The Playhouse Settlement in Cleveland, for instance, was open to whites and blacks, while no such social institution in Cincinnati and Columbus was open to all. A black physician was appointed to a medical staff with white doctors in a major hospital system in Cleveland, while citywide hospital medical staffs in Cincinnati and Columbus were all white. Among many other instances of such regional variations, only northern Ohio’s Cuyahoga County (Cleveland) elected black candidates to seats in the state legislature in the twenties.14

The strength of protest against the color line was greater in northern Ohio than in other regions. The struggle for equal rights was carried on in cities throughout Ohio, but it was conducted in distinctive ways in the state’s southern and central regions because levels of racial hostility were comparatively higher there. Student boycotts protesting public
school segregation in Dayton and Springfield, for instance, reflected the fact that all-black schools only existed in southern Ohio and central Ohio. Racial intolerance grew in northern Ohio, although it remained less intense there than elsewhere in the state. Nevertheless, protest against racial injustice in Ohio was more recurrent, insistent, and widespread in scope in the north than in regions to the south. The Cleveland Gazette, for instance, was decidedly the most persistent and strident voice of African American protest in Ohio. Only its editor, Harry C. Smith, advised African Americans to possess “a U.S. Army Riot Gun” as a means of defense against possible attacks by white rioters. Also, the most active NAACP branches in Ohio were located in northern cities, particularly Cleveland.

Why was African American protest strongest in northern Ohio in the period 1915–1930? Why was white intolerance greatest in southern Ohio then? The answers offered in this study are in accord with the findings of scholars, notably David A. Gerber, who see continuities in nineteenth and twentieth century African American history in the Midwest. Early in the nineteenth century, the cultural and social values of the southeastern states and northeastern states were transplanted in southern Ohio and northern Ohio respectively. A pro–equal rights and anti-slavery viewpoint then common in northeastern states, especially in New England, took root in northern Ohio. Meantime attitudes of racial intolerance generally found in the southern slave states became embedded in southern Ohio. These developments were influenced by the sectional origins of the white and black settlers and their regional settlement patterns in Ohio. The initial black settlers from slave states were most populous in Ohio’s southern region. This Ohio regional race-relations model was shaped in the early decades after 1800. Color line customs and protest traditions established from south to north in Ohio then evolved through the nineteenth century and were perpetuated to 1930 and beyond.

Ohio findings affirm a standard thesis in black urban history that was set forth by scholars in the 1960s ghetto school who held that racial intolerance was the catalytic agent in developments that shaped patterns of black urbanization. Ohio research also informs the arguments saying that unique local circumstances, aside from the color line, were factors making black community formation different from city to city. Scholars such as Kenneth L. Kusmer (1986) and Henry Louis Taylor, Jr. (1993), while accepting the standard theory about the importance of race relations, argue that city building processes and “structural forces” in an urban center also impacted the black community formation there.

This Ohio analysis indicates that the differences in the shapes of black
urban communities, in some respects, are attributable to local demographic, spatial, and economic factors that were peculiar in each city. Historian Joe William Trotter, Jr. asserts that the Great Migration's impact on a city varied from place to place in the United States with an urban center's evolving economic structure and its standing among the nation's range of cities.\(^{19}\) Black populations grew in urban centers with booming industrial-commercial activities and stagnated or shrank in cities with less expansive or faltering economies. Census figures for major Ohio cities support this interpretation. Black urban populations in Ohio varied greatly in magnitude. The state's largest black communities were in Ohio's biggest and most prosperous cities, Cleveland, Cincinnati, and Columbus. Black population size in an Ohio urban center generally was related to that city's place in the ranking of Ohio cities listed according to total population. Central Ohio's Springfield was an outstanding example of a city not greatly impacted by the black migration in this period. Springfield, which prospered before 1900, did not keep economic pace with major Ohio cities in the twentieth century. Springfield's black population was substantial in 1910 and comprised a relatively large proportion of the city's total population. Springfield in the twenties was smaller in total population than Akron, Toledo and most of the other large Ohio cities, and after 1920 the African American population growth rate in Springfield began to fall sharply.\(^{20}\)

Black urban population growth rates in the Great Lakes region, arguably, were related to the nature of a city's economy and the ethnic composition of its workforce. Historian Emma Lou Thornbrough finds that black urban populations in Indiana increased at especially fast rates in several industrial cities including Gary, South Bend, and Fort Wayne. Similarly, the African American growth rate was high in Detroit, Michigan.\(^{21}\) The Ohio cities with notably rapid rates of increase were Akron, Toledo, Youngstown, and Cleveland. Remarkably, the numbers of African Americans in Cleveland grew 751 percent between 1910 and 1930. All of these Great Lakes area urban centers shared some common characteristics. They were industrial cities with comparatively large white foreign-born populations and with relatively small numbers of African Americans in 1910. They were more dependent on white foreign-born labor than other cities; consequently, labor shortages there were greater when immigration was severely curtailed during World War I and after. This exigency forced industries to end racial exclusion policies and to employ African Americans. The small black populations grew rapidly in these circumstances, evidently because industrial job opportunities for African Americans were greater in these cities than elsewhere.\(^{22}\)
Unique local topography was a factor in the development of a distinctive black residential pattern in each Ohio city. Sometimes natural barriers, like rivers, influenced the shapes of boundaries encompassing black neighborhoods or districts. The Cuyahoga River formed a residential color line in Cleveland separating the nearly all-black districts on the city's East Side and the practically all-white West Side. Land formations or their absence figured in decisions about the locations of all-black settlements. This was an aspect of the Cincinnati area's distinctive black residential pattern, which included African American hilltop settlements that were like distant satellites of the black residential districts in the extraordinarily crowded river-basin West End where most African Americans resided. Cincinnati possessed much less flat land than its urban peers in the state because it was the only major Ohio city located along the Ohio River Valley. Cincinnati residents occupied the low land of the river basin and the surrounding hilltops that were often naturally separated by small valleys or ravines. While the outlying hilly areas were mainly white, there were a few separate black settlements on hilltops, for example, at West College Hill and in areas north of Lockland. Local and outside realtors and investors selected these isolated sites and initiated low-cost housing developments for African Americans.23

Differences within black society added to the complexity of African American urban life in each city early in the twentieth century. Recent scholarship provides interpretations that point to the existence of this diversity across the United States and call attention to distinctions of class, gender, and culture in black urban life. This study shows that these distinctions were in play within the African American society of each large Ohio city.

The social-economic stratification of African American society, which had existed for generations, was reshaped in urban industrial centers after 1915. Historians interested in this development produced a body of literature, which grew significantly after 1990, emphasizing the importance of black working class formation and black migration to industrial centers in such disparate locations as California, Illinois, Ohio, Pennsylvania, Virginia, and West Virginia.24 The valuable Ohio analysis is Kimberley L. Phillips, *Alabama North: African-American Migrants, Community and Working Class Activism in Cleveland, 1915–1945* (1999). A new class of black industrial workers took shape in Ohio cities when the numbers of African Americans employed in industrial occupations rose sharply. This came during and after World War I with the modification of racially biased employment practices in local factories, mills, plants, and railroad facilities. The growth of this class was greatest in Ohio industrial centers, particularly Cleveland, that were most adversely affected when the
wartime curtailment of immigration eliminated the supply of white foreign-born laborers. The great majority of adult African Americans in Ohio cities were employed in low-paying industrial jobs and domestic work. The black business and professional classes were relatively small, but in Ohio cities during this period there were extraordinary rates of increase in the numbers of black ministers, teachers, lawyers, physicians, dentists, and entrepreneurs of many kinds. In an important regional analysis of color and class in this period, historian Joe William Trotter, Jr. asserts that the black industrial workers and the small black elite class in southern West Virginia were linked together by social-economic circumstances; he explains that reciprocity was the key element in this relationship. Black professionals depended on black industrial working class clients as the sources of their income in a color line society. In turn, the black industrial working class usually relied on black professionals to supply its leadership in matters of protest, politics, and institutional life. This mutual reliance became fully characteristic of the relationship between these two black population groups in Ohio cities in the period 1915–1930, when the clientele of black professionals became almost wholly African American. Black entrepreneurs and professionals in Ohio often served white patrons or clients in the generation prior to World War I. This became increasing rare as the hardening of the Ohio color line accelerated after 1915. During this period in urban industrial Ohio, black lawyers, physicians, social workers, ministers, and newspaper proprietors most often were at the head of protest activities and in the leadership of social and political organizations in African American neighborhoods. These activities were in the interests of the lower and upper levels of black society. The efforts of the black elite to uplift black working people were based on more than altruism. Through service in these leading positions black professionals acquired additional prestige, status, and sometimes income as well, when the leadership involved paying jobs in private institutions and in government service. Meanwhile in Ohio, many African American workers in industrial and domestic occupations patronized black business places and black professionals using income earned from companies and other sources located in the larger economy beyond black neighborhoods.

Often people at the bottom and at the top of African American urban society experienced starkly different lifestyles in Ohio and elsewhere, notwithstanding the reciprocal relationship between the two black populations. Historian Georgina Hickey’s recent study (2003) illuminates the complexities of this relationship by examining the functions and inequities of class in black Atlanta. In Ohio cities, black working people and the black elite often lived in separate neighborhoods that were
sharply different in character. In Cincinnati, for instance, George Street was a black working class neighborhood situated in the city’s tenderloin where bawdy houses and vice activities were permitted by authorities at the start of the wartime black migration. George Street was located in the densely populated black working class West End district, which contained old industrial, commercial, and residential buildings, usually crowded tenement houses or other multi-family dwellings. Walnut Hills, in contrast, was the address of many in Cincinnati’s black business and professional classes. Located just outside the river basin’s industrial districts, Walnut Hills was a residential area with spacious single-family dwellings and a mix of black neighborhoods and white ones. 29

African American social and cultural life in Ohio cities, likewise, varied greatly from class to class. African Americans in business and the professions often were members of black congregations that owned fine traditional church edifices in residential neighborhoods. Ohio’s black elite formed elaborate organized structures of formal social life including fraternal lodges and social clubs, many owning their clubhouses or lodge halls. In contrast, many black working people attended church services in rented storefront quarters in downtown areas. Socially approved leisure activities at the bottom of black society in urban Ohio often were informal in nature, for instance, involving people with close kinship and friendship ties meeting in their homes, in nearby streets, or in neighborhood community centers. 30

Complexities in African American society and in life along the color line involved important distinctions of gender, as well as class differences. Studies on black urban history generally agree that gender made a great difference in the amount of social-economic opportunity available in Midwest cities. 31 In accord with that scholarship, this research finds that in Ohio cities employment opportunities were less limited for black men than for black women, who encountered both gender limits and color barriers in the job market. Consequently, only the least desirable and lowest paying jobs were open to black working women. Black women in the period 1915–1930 were excluded from men’s occupations, such as industrial jobs, and hired for traditional women’s work, excepting the World War I years. The severe wartime labor shortages forced Ohio industry to temporarily lower color and gender barriers and employ black women for work in factories, plants, and railroad yards. Most of these wartime occupational gains were lost in the twenties, when men were available for industrial work. As in prewar times, in the postwar decade large proportions of black women employed in Ohio cities were in domestic work. Meantime, white employers following the color line hired only white women for clerical and retail store positions. 32
Employment and life experiences were notably different for black women in the working and the professional classes. Some black women in each large Ohio city were employed in professions approved for women in this period, including teaching, social work, and nursing. This employment usually was with institutions or facilities that catered to African Americans. Professional opportunities for African Americans were greater in the cities with larger numbers of racially separate institutions. Professional employment opportunities for black women, in education for example, were affected by the color line and its regional variations from southern Ohio to northern Ohio. Black public school educators in Cincinnati taught only in all-back schools. No all-black public schools existed in Cleveland, and some African American teachers there were assigned to schools with white and black students. Consequently, a significantly larger number of black female public school teachers were employed in Cincinnati than in Cleveland. An African American female was principal of an all-black Cincinnati public school. None of the public school principals in Cleveland was black, but an African American woman was elected to the Cleveland school board in the twenties. The leadership and service roles of black female social workers were important to African American institutional life in urban Ohio. But, gender lines also were evident in this area of institutional and civic leadership. Generally, black women were the supervisors and staff members of social work and care institutions in African American neighborhoods. Black male professionals and entrepreneurs usually served as officers and board members of major black community organizations, particularly the NAACP branches and Urban League affiliates.

Black women in Ohio participated in African American civic affairs and provided community leadership in distinctive ways. African American women with ties to the black elite developed an infrastructure of sororities, church groups, social clubs, and charity associations. Many were affiliated with the African American Ohio Federation of Women’s Clubs. Charity work in the black community and promotion of racial uplift were common dimensions of black women’s organizations, which otherwise varied much in aims and activities. Women at the bottom and the top of black society were active in organized religion, making up large proportions of black church congregations. Black women managed and staffed black branches of the Young Women’s Christian Association in Ohio. The reader may note that historian Evelyn Brooks Higginbotham (1993), in a groundbreaking book, focuses on the important leadership roles of African American women in black Baptist congregations during the period 1880–1920. Local and state women’s auxil-
iaries and the Woman’s Convention were formed within the framework of what was then the largest black denomination in the United States, the National Baptist Convention, U.S.A. These organizations became platforms to voice the distinctive views of black women. Early in the twentieth century, the Woman’s Convention sponsored many kinds of local community betterment projects and entered the political arena in support of women’s suffrage. Specialized Ohio studies on this and other gender themes are needed.

The organized voices of African American women in Ohio were heard in partisan politics and in protests during the period 1915–1930. Clevelander Lethia Fleming, for instance, was a veteran women’s suffrage activist and a member of the national Republican party’s black women’s advisory board in 1920. Wilberforce University instructor Hallie Q. Brown led Republican Calvin Coolidge’s presidential election campaign among black women in 1924. She was a prominent official in the National Federation of Negro Women’s Clubs early in the twenties. Undoubtedly, most black women as well as black men voted Republican in this period; however, some black female and black male Republicans objected to that party’s color line practices. The Colored Women’s Republican Club in Columbus became the Colored Women’s Independent Political League in 1919. The affiliation change was a protest against the Republican Party’s failure to back the passage of an equal rights bill in the Ohio legislature. This was an early expression of black independence from the Republican party in Ohio, which became more common in the twenties than in the teens.

Gender lines clearly were evident in African American political and protest activities. African Americans chosen for public offices rarely were females. NAACP branch officers and trustee board members mostly were black men, while black women only occasionally held such posts. Cleveland Juvenile Court probation officer L. Pearl Mitchell, for instance, was a Cleveland NAACP executive committee member in 1928. Black men were most prominent in the usual protest venues, courtrooms, legislative halls, and executive offices. Notably, black women took featured roles in street demonstrations and student boycotts in Ohio, which were less traditional protest forms and uncommon in this period. For example, scores of black women in Springfield, Ohio, made up a pool of demonstrators who walked picket lines for months in 1922 to back a student boycott protesting racial segregation in the local public school system.

African American life in urban Ohio was made still more complex by the fact that black class and black gender groupings each were divided into newcomers and old residents. Most black migrants possessed a
southernness mirroring the culture of the South. In recent years, scholarship on black migration has revealed the continuity of southern culture in African American centers of the North. Darlene Clark Hine asserts that southern black women living in the Midwest perpetuated a broad range of the South’s cultural values, for example, with respect to food preparation, menus, home remedies, religious practices, family ties, and speech patterns. Did such cultural distinctions arise from the social isolation of southern newcomers in the North’s African American societies? Kenneth L. Kusmer argues that there is evidence showing that black natives of the North and South were much “integrated” in African American institutions, excepting some churches.

Perhaps excepting Columbus, evidence in Ohio mostly supports Kusmer’s assertion. According to J. S. Himes, southern newcomers in the black wartime migration “were anathema to the old residents” in Columbus. “This resentment created a rift in the Negro community which manifested itself in every phase of Negro life, and remains even today a source of tension in some quarters,” Himes wrote in 1941 when he was director of research for the Columbus Urban League. Himes was explicit, pointing to “the often chilly welcome” that newcomers received in some of Columbus’ black churches, social clubs, lodges, and “many other groups.” Northerners and southerners commonly interacted in Cleveland’s African American institutions. Contemporary black sociologist Kelly Miller, nevertheless, made critical remarks about the attitudes and reactions of old black residents of Cleveland, whom he characterized as unwelcoming to black migrants from the South. Shortly after visiting Cleveland, Miller composed a report on “Negro Migration” that several black weeklies published in July 1923. Miller said that as the black migration from the South accelerated, the old black Clevelander stood “bewildered as he felt the foundations of his former privileges shaking beneath him.” Local black weekly editor Harry C. Smith wrote that Miller’s remarks about Cleveland were in error and that old black residents of the city did not “at first oppose the in rushing tide,” as Miller claimed. Smith, one of city’s longtime black citizens, praised the old black Clevelanders, asserting that they “were the ones who made possible the favorable conditions of all kinds sought by those of color who constituted the inrush to Cleveland.”

Culture consciousness undoubtedly existed among African Americans in Ohio during this period. Frequently it was easy to recognize the identity of black newcomers or black southerners in urban Ohio. There was great awareness and much public discussion among African Americans of the presence in Ohio of black migrants from the South. As the forgoing comments illustrate, African American natives
of Ohio were at least somewhat ambivalent about black migrants coming to the state from the South. Many old black residents in every Ohio city manifested humane concern and community spirit by coming to the assistance of black migrants making the adjustment to a different life experience in Ohio. Black newcomers were welcome often, if not always, in Ohio’s existing African American institutions. At the same time there was a measure of concern that the black migration was bringing adjustment pains and different cultural values that might adversely affect established black residents of Ohio. “A Colored Citizen of Elyria,” Ohio, provided a telling illustration of this ambivalence. In a 1920 letter to the Cleveland Gazette’s editor, he reported that local church records showed that “about 500 of our people” settled in Elyria, located just west of Cleveland, after “coming from the South.” He wrote: “Some of them purchased homes but many had to be taken into the homes of our good citizens who made them welcome,” adding that all were welcome in this small city’s two African American churches, one Baptist and the other Methodist Episcopal. But he indicated that there were concerns, stating: “Some of the new arrivals are not what they should be and are making it harder for our good people here.” This letter from Elyria showed a mix of caring and anxiety about black migrants from the South that was found in African American urban communities across Ohio.

This dual response to black migrants was one of the many ambiguities arising from the Ohio color line. Another was the mixed answer to the question of how best to deal with color line problems and to promote racial uplift. Black activists who engaged in public protest saw the violation of citizenship rights as the greatest concern. Others focused on urban social problems that were complicated by the color line and used racially separate social work institutions to address these ills. Advocates of black social work sometimes were criticized for furthering racial segregation and racial proscription preferred by many whites. Black citizenship rights proponents sometimes were perceived as insensitive when they charged that the racially separate institutions caring for needy blacks were a threat to the equal rights cause.

Black activists who were principally concerned with social work had different views and strategies than those largely interested in civil rights issues; but, usually in these years, members of neither activist group took a doctrinaire or absolutist position in favor of racial integration or racial separation. In every Ohio region, leading African Americans generally approved racial separation in some circumstances. Even the black Ohioans who were most inclined to protest color line grievances did not object to separate activities and organizations conducted by African Americans, if they were privately financed and voluntary. Harry C.
Smith, a founder of the Cleveland NAACP, surely was the loudest voice of protest in Ohio. The pages of his weekly, The Gazette, blasted racially exclusive practices consistently and continuously for decades. Yet Smith approved black private organizations, institutions, and enterprises, like his own African American newspaper business. For example, early in his political career Smith founded Cleveland’s Afro American Republican Club. Likewise, black weekly editor Wendell P. Dabney, who was an early leader of the Cincinnati NAACP, commonly published biting criticism of blacks who accommodated to racial exclusion imposed by whites. Nevertheless, he was a member of a black men’s club and a stockholder in black corporations. Also, Dabney was on the board of directors of Cincinnati’s Home for Colored Girls and Negro Civic Welfare Association. The NAACP in Ohio was a generally effective agent of protest against various kinds of racial discrimination, but it did not uniformly oppose racial separation. Many members of Ohio NAACP branches even were disinclined to oppose publicly supported schools and hospitals for blacks because that would imply criticism of the black professionals who staffed them. In consequence, for example, the local NAACP branches played marginal roles in the anti-segregation campaigns at Springfield’s Fulton School and Mansfield’s Bowman Street School in the twenties.

Racial exclusion and discrimination, however, were objectionable to the broad spectrum of the state’s leading African Americans, again regardless of region, during 1915–1930. The exclusion of African Americans from public places was a grievance to all because it denied blacks access to the benefits obtainable in public venues and generally violated state law, as well as denying individual blacks the freedom of choice available to whites. Even the black Ohioans who were most identified with racially separate organizations and institutions occasionally protested color line grievances. The Marcus Garvey movement emphatically advocated a separatist strategy for advancing African American interests, but its organizations in Ohio sometimes protested racially exclusive practices. Cleveland’s Universal Negro Improvement Association was represented on a committee of local black civic leaders investigating racial discrimination at Cleveland City Hospital in 1928. Also in Cleveland, Phillis Wheatley Association Executive Secretary Jane E. Hunter was best known for her management of a separate shelter for black single women and not for racial protest. But in 1929 Jane E. Hunter and other prominent African Americans appeared before the Cleveland City Council to oppose a hospital bonds issue because the municipal hospital excluded black interns and nurse trainees. National Urban League affiliates in Ohio principally were devoted to improving
the welfare of needy African Americans, but at times their leaders expressed concern about color line issues. Columbus Urban League Executive Secretary Nimrod B. Allen asked an Ohio State University sociology professor to give testimony opposing a bill against racial intermarriage that was being considered by the state legislature in 1925. Similarly, the existence of racial bias in Cincinnati concerned African American social worker James H. Robinson, who became the executive secretary of Cincinnati’s Negro Civic Welfare Association. Robinson emphasized that prejudice and racial discrimination were fundamental to the social problems affecting blacks when he reported the findings of his survey of Cincinnati’s black community to the city’s Council of Social Agencies in 1919.

The activities of other black Ohioans also showed that concerns about social problems and opposition to civil rights violations were not mutually exclusive. Dr. Charles H. Garvin, a black physician in Cleveland, was undaunted in claiming his citizenship rights in the larger society while supporting separate black organizations promoting the social and economic advancement of African Americans. Garvin, a staff urologist at Lakeside Hospital, once was the only African American on the medical staff of Cleveland's private hospital system. In 1925 he purchased a home in an all-white residential area of Cleveland. The Garvin family stayed in it despite severe harassment, including a bombing. At the same time, Garvin joined other black doctors to form the Cleveland Medical Reading Club. He advocated the establishment of a private black hospital in Cleveland. In his lifetime, Garvin was active in the Cleveland affiliates of both the Urban League and the NAACP. In Cincinnati, Lizzie Branch and her husband possessed the means to reside in an affluent largely black suburb, Walnut Hills. Much of her time was spent in church and women’s club work. She, like Garvin, supported racial organizations with different immediate aims and opposing strategies. But all were meant to ameliorate the conditions of African Americans in the long run. In 1926, according to her biography, Lizzie Branch was “prominent in the Y.W.C.A., N.A.A.C.P., U.N.I.A., and every movement for racial uplift.”

Ideally, disparate African Americans would unite to counter instances of racial discrimination. Such unity was not always realized, but civil rights issues in Ohio often did unify African Americans representing different approaches to color line problems. Perhaps the most eloquent expression of this ideal in Ohio at the time was made in the words of George A. Myers, Cleveland’s most influential black elder. On occasions, Myers made alliances with an old political foe when civil rights issues were at stake. Black weekly editor Harry C. Smith and
Myers were affiliated with different factions of the Republican party in Ohio. In many respects, the two men were opposites. Myers was a friend of Booker T. Washington prior to the war, and his style in some ways reflected that of the famous Tuskegeeian. Congeniality was Myers’ hallmark, and it brought him warm acquaintanceships with important figures in government and business who visited his Hollenden Hotel shop. When Myers used his influence in the interest of African Americans, he did so out of public view. His letters to powerful acquaintances stated protests in a genteel and courteous rhetoric. In contrast, Harry C. Smith was a founder of the Cleveland NAACP. He favored public protest, especially in his Cleveland Gazette. The editor’s style often was abrasive, and his racial protest rhetoric was deliberately bombastic.

Their differences notwithstanding, they sometimes made common cause, for example, in the campaign against Cleveland’s municipal hospital color lines during the twenties. Smith fired editorial broadsides against municipal officials responsible for Cleveland City Hospital’s racial policies. In private correspondence, Myers alerted Cleveland City Manager William R. Hopkins that the municipal hospital issue was causing his administration to lose the black vote. Perceiving this as a political threat, Hopkins was offended and accused Myers of having “gone over to Harry Smith bag and baggage.” In reply Myers explained that his views and actions concerning civil rights had not changed. Myers wrote: “For Mr. Smith I hold no brief, he is as you know and others, perfectly competent to take care of himself. But for your enlightenment I wish to say that we have never trained together politically. . . . The same conditions exist today. But when any Negro was or is unjustly discriminated against or deprived of his manhood rights, we have always been, as all Negroes should be, as one in their defense.”

Arguably, Myers’ sentiment was widespread among black Ohioans at the end of the twenties.

Documents for the period 1915–1930 reveal the many complex dimensions of black urban life in the shadows of Ohio’s color barriers. No theme stands out more clearly than the role of local people in the struggle against the Ohio color line. Out-of-state personalities rarely participated in equal rights and social work activities in Ohio. Affiliates of national associations were present in the state, but they owed their vitality to local African American leadership. Again and again, the record shows that the struggles in Ohio were conducted by African American local residents in cities from Cleveland to Columbus to Cincinnati and from Toledo to Springfield to Dayton. White intolerance had mounted, and the aims of the struggle were unrealized when this period ended. The evidence, however, proves that black Ohioans were more organized
and effective in confronting the realities of the Ohio color line in 1930 than in 1915. Equal rights and social work organizations achieved maturity in Ohio cities in these years. This was important to the struggle in the future because these organizations consequently were prepared to be the principal vehicles of the civil rights movement in Ohio at crucial times after mid-century.