Local Matters: Race, Place, and Community Politics after the Civil War

Dissertation

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Abstract

This study examines how a seemingly disparate population of rural migrants was able to incorporate itself into the political process and elevate community concerns to the center of political discourse after the Civil War. Too often scholars pay little attention to the local concerns and historical processes that determined not only how former slaves conducted themselves in the political arena, but also how their goals and aspirations changed over time. Surrounded by majority slaveholding counties in the Mid-South, Memphis provides an opportunity to study the grassroots political mobilization of former slaves. Beginning with an examination of the wartime migrations of enslaved men and women in the Mississippi River Valley to Memphis, Tennessee, this study identifies the cooperative strategies black migrants utilized to express their freedom, forge new bonds of fellowship, and establish a sense of community in their new surroundings. In order to understand how the concerns of former slaves became a matter of public interest, I trace the movements and daily interactions of members of social networks within black neighborhoods to demonstrate how socialization and civic life influenced the contours of popular politics. While black political leaders focused on civil rights and the transformation of the social order, former slaves used politics to experience freedom and express their
desire for self-determination in ways that demonstrated their level of attachment to their community.

By focusing upon these social and spatially based networks, this study seeks to broaden our historical understanding of the connection between civic life and political participation in an urban setting. An examination of former slaves’ cooperative associations reveals a variety of personal connections that transcended material conditions and long-term or migrant status. African American residential activities, leisure interests, and personal familiarity established a feeling of connectedness in their neighborhoods that became the basis for the development of political strategies. These social attributes, therefore, become a way to reconsider the shifting political alliances that characterized post-Civil War southern politics. African Americans were willing to forge alliances with ethnic minorities and ex-Confederates that reflected their sense of belonging in their respective communities and elevated local concerns to the center of public debate. In the end, my study challenges historians to consider looking beyond questions of race, class, and gender to explain black southerners’ participation in the public sphere. African Americans responded to multiple issues that allowed them to carve out a middle ground. In Memphis, African Americans relied upon neighborhood associations to foster a consultative model of local self-governance designed to not only elect their own representatives to local office, but also to articulate their desire for self-determination by ensuring their right to secure their material well-being, protect friends and families from violence, and educate children in their own neighborhoods. An examination of neighborhood life, the
central role of black sodalities in popular politics, and electoral behavior, therefore, demonstrates former slaves’ willingness to eschew long-term political objectives for short-term goals to protect the social integrity of their new communities.
Dedication

Dedicated to my parents, Dan and Shirley Page, my brother, Brent, and my loving and supporting wife, Staci, and our beautiful son, Aidan
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Chapter 1: Introduction

On December 9, 1874, a coalition of African American benevolent associations announced their decision to align themselves with former slave owners. Commenting on the contentious battles over municipal affairs that characterized Reconstruction era politics in Memphis, their proclamation suggested a new direction in local politics:

After longs years of citizenship, without evil intent on our part, we find ourselves…estranged from our best interests, and in a most bitter antagonistic relation to the true people of the south – the owners of the soil – through whom alone we could only hope for prosperity in this section of country.¹

The events surrounding this alliance were indicative of the kind of changes taking place in southern communities towards the end of the Reconstruction era. The Republican Party’s failure to sustain a viable political alternative in the South, along with diminished popular support for the reform agenda of Reconstruction, led black southerners to look for new ways to maintain their influence in the political arena.² In the months following this declaration, elite Southerners’ support for former slaves’ efforts to appoint black teachers in public schools seemingly solidified the alliance between former slaves and slave owners in Memphis. As a result, in the 1876 municipal election, elite Memphians’ candidates were successfully elected to office. It took ten years since the end of federal occupation, but members of the antebellum elite
were able to regain political power in Memphis with African American political support.

At first glance, the circumstances surrounding the alliance between former slaves and elite Memphians fit well with the narrative on post-Civil War politics. While violence, fraud, and intimidation proved to be an expedient recourse for southern Democrats to reclaim political control, practical concerns often led elite white men to consider conciliatory gestures towards black southerners, so long as these alliances did not substantially challenge their exclusive control over public or private matters. In Memphis, this allowed elite conservatives to not only minimize the political influence of African Americans, but also reclaim public authority over the working-class and aspiring middle-class population of native whites and Irish immigrants. At the same time, the alliance reiterated other scholars’ conclusions about the trajectory of black politics. In the years following black enfranchisement, African Americans became disenchanted with the Republican Party’s moderation and failure to include them in the political process and fight for lasting reforms. In Memphis, factionalism exposed divisions between the black political elite and the formerly enslaved migrant population who saw little returns from the partisan infighting and civil rights agenda that had little to do with their daily lives. Lacking a political majority and threatened by a white working and middle-class male population taking an increasingly aggressive racial stance, former slaves were able to maintain some political influence by aligning with elite Southerners.
Although a closer examination of events surrounding this alliance demonstrated race, class, and gender alone would not adequately explain the evolution of local politics in Memphis. Instead, in my attempt to understand how a seemingly disparate population of formerly enslaved migrants became incorporated into the political process and approached electoral debates it became clear that I needed to rethink these categories of analysis in order to understand public discourse on the local level. While former slaves exhibited a great deal of political enthusiasm, my analysis of popular politics and black voters in Memphis revealed those involved were really a distinct group of men and women with associational ties to neighborhood churches and benevolent associations dispersed throughout the city. As a consequence, national debates were often reframed to reflect community concerns. Much of the political conflicts that took place were actually neighborhood battles over place and influence among competing corporate interests. By focusing on socio-spatial relationships and the associational ties that drove black politics, it became easier to understand the strife that characterized Memphis politics. The association of black mutual aid societies, for instance, that I initially credited with helping facilitate the alliance between former slaves and slave owners had little to do with the debate over the appointment of black teachers. Rather the coalition of mutual aid organizations were in fact neighborhood associations from the northern and eastern periphery of the city with strong agricultural ties, while the controversy over black teachers represented a neighborhood debate transpiring in South Memphis between urban working-class migrants, antebellum free blacks, and elite Memphians. In the end, the proliferation of
coalitions after Reconstruction demonstrated how practical concerns often led neighbors with seemingly different interests to come together for common purposes. While race, class, and gender divisions were not absent, they were often submerged beneath the politics of place producing unlikely alliances.6

The members of the neighborhood churches and associations, therefore, form the basis of my study. Similar to recent studies on post-Civil War African American history, in attempting to understand late nineteenth-century public discourse it became necessary to consider the social issues facilitating formerly enslaved migrants’ interests in local politics. The war and its aftermath ushered in a new struggle over the boundaries of race and self-determination in communities across the South. African Americans looked to secure the fruits of their own labor, establish independence in their own households, and form autonomous social institutions.7 And, in cities like Memphis, formerly enslaved migrants’ struggle to secure independence was compounded by their efforts to establish a feeling of rootedness in the urban environment. Politics represented merely one way for rural migrants to secure a sense of belonging in their new surroundings. As a result, in order to understand not only what informed former slaves’ political conduct, but also to consider why some former slaves were more active in politics than others, it was necessary to consider the personal relationships and social activities that organized their daily lives. To unpack the social and cultural importance of place, this project relies on cultural geographers’ understanding of place as more than a locality, but as an intricate web of human experiences and struggles that give meaning to their surroundings.8 In Memphis,
African Americans utilized these place-based personal networks to protect the welfare of their friends and families and become part of a community. Thus, while surprising at first, formerly enslaved migrants’ multiple alliances with antebellum free blacks, Irish immigrants, and elite Southerners proved to be part of the larger process of securing their place in the new social order.

Certainly, studying African American political practices is not new. Scholarship on slavery and working-class agency, for example, has shown that while occurring outside formal avenues of power, strategies of resistance were no less political. Beginning with Raymond and Alice Bauer’s examination of day-to-day acts of resistance among enslaved people and advanced by labor historians, sociologists, and philosophers scholars have emphasized the political dimensions of these “hidden-transcripts.” Whether these acts consisted of breaking tools, slowing down work, or feigning illness these practices of everyday life were more than reactionary, but designed to assert one’s right to self-determination. While these acts were often discounted and misunderstood by slave owners and employers alike, to those engaged in these activities they had real political intent.9

On the surface, these strategies were universal by nature; however, they invariably lend themselves to an analysis of culture. Much of the conflict that took place between slaves and masters occurred over the boundaries of power and African American men’s and women’s struggle for community away from the supervision and control of white Southerners. Despite white Southerners’ best efforts, slave owners
never were able to create a “total institution.” Numerous studies have emphasized how enslaved people’s struggles to control their time and movements were suited for socio-cultural production and the creation of an African American identity. This cultural identity, Lawrence Levine argued, was communalistic in nature and enabled slaves to create “a new world by transcending the narrow confines of the one in which they were forced to live.” Much of this corporate identity was composed of West African antecedents rooted in the spiritual practices, ritual beliefs, and folk traditions of enslaved people that organized their daily life. By its very nature, the existence of this alternative culture was evidence of resistance, that, although covert, was subversive.

These approaches to studying slavery provide a framework for recent studies on African American political culture in the era of emancipation. Once the Union Army began to advance into the Mississippi Valley slaves no longer felt the need to disguise their discontent. During the war, slaves acted on their desires for freedom by refusing to work, renegotiating the terms of their labor, and abandoning southern slave owners en masse. The Civil War, Stephaine Camp argues, constituted a “political breakthrough” and represented an “open and mass enactment of previously covert practices.” These strategies set the stage for the contest between former slaves and white Southerners over land and labor after the war. Lacking formal avenues of negotiation, freed people absconded from work, left landowners before their contracts obligations were fulfilled, and quit to protest unfair treatment and inadequate pay in order to address the imbalance of power that still characterized race relations in the
American South. All of these tactics reflected a strong political consciousness. And, freed people’s desire for independence and autonomy was often experienced and expressed in popular politics.¹⁴

Similarly, studies on the political struggles and conduct of freed people have revealed a great deal of cultural continuity between slavery and freedom. Commenting on this process, Steven Hahn contends, “freedpeople built and drew on relations, institutions, infrastructures, and aspirations that they and their ancestors had struggle for and constructed as slaves.”¹⁵ Indeed, looking back towards slavery it is possible to identify many shared values and beliefs that shaped political activism. Freed people organized to protect customary rights won under slavery, kinship relations, and cooperative work habits that challenged traditional capitalist assumptions of a free wage economy. Freed people also conducted themselves in the political arena in a manner that reflected their way of life under slavery. African American political involvement and organizations remained rooted in kinship relations. And, this established the social foundation for the collective decision making process often witnessed in rural areas.¹⁶ Additionally, the mass public demonstrations and meetings suggest freed people often viewed freedom as a collective struggle. The participation of men and women, to borrow the words of Elsa Barkely Brown, demonstrated they considered the vote as a “collective; not an individual possession,” further revealing former slaves corporate identity.¹⁷ And, while not the subject of this project more still remains to be studied on the patterns of
cultural continuity between slavery and freedom, particularly African influences on former slaves’ political conduct.

Not discounting the political and cultural similarities that existed between slaves and freed people, this study places rural to urban migrations and former slaves struggle to establish a sense of belonging in their new environment at the center of investigation. The involuntary and voluntary migrations of enslaved and free people remain a central theme in African American history. Beginning with the African slave trade and continuing with the relocation of one million enslaved people into the southern interior in the antebellum era, the challenges African Americans faced to reconstitute familiar relations and community did not end in the nineteenth century. In the twentieth century, southern men and women migrated to the North and the West in the hopes of finding new opportunities and a better life. As a result, African American political struggles can not be easily separated from their efforts to reconstitute a sense of familiarity and belonging, a place, in their new surroundings.

More than just a characterization of space and physical proximity, migrants’ understanding of place reflected the socialization process that helped facilitate feelings of connectedness over time. To understand the process this study relies on neighborhoods as a framework for historical investigation. Certainly the persistence of racism and localism remained barriers that precluded African American efforts to establish permanent foundations. As a result, freed people’s struggle to carve out autonomous social spaces provides insight on the debate over race and place and where these newcomers belonged. The friendships, community organizations, and
civic ties they formed helped overcome these boundaries and transform urban spaces into socially meaningful places. The lack of segregation after the Civil War meant the urban black population was typically dispersed in enclaves throughout southern cities. And, while scholars disagree on what constitutes a neighborhood, most consider neighborhoods more than just distinct units of the American landscape defined by their residential structures and physical attributes in close proximity. Rather neighborhoods are defined by a variety of socio-spatial attributes such as structural characteristics, social proximity, and income as well as social activities, familiarity, and the degree of social interaction. Neighbors lived next door to each other, attended the same church, and belonged to the same organizations. Thus, by paying careful attention to patterns of neighborhood life it is possible to consider not only social interactions that help bring about a sense of community, but identify the various levels of attachment that informed former slaves’ civic and political engagement with the wider community.

This dissertation is organized in three parts. The first part is divided into two chapters and considers how race and place were contested by rural migrants, black and white local residents, and northern military officials in Memphis. Similar to other cities in the American South, Memphis was a destination for thousands of black migrants. As a result, between 1860 and 1865 the Memphis black population increased from 3,882 to over 16,000. Local residents’ response to these intra-regional migrations were part of a much larger debate taking place in areas across the
South and Mid-West over where these newcomers belonged. In Memphis, notions of place were tied more closely around the boundaries of race, limiting freed people’s ability to reconstitute a sense of community in their new surroundings. No longer bound by the restraints of slaveholders’ authority, white Memphians viewed former slaves struggle for autonomy as a threat to the entire social body. The first chapter examines rural migrants’ efforts to reconstitute familiar social relations in an urban setting in the face of hardening racial prejudices and the tightening of legal restrictions designed to protect the social and economic order. Ultimately, local white and black residents objected not just to the new assertiveness of black soldiers and migrants in their midst, but to the social activities of former slaves that threatened to change the city’s character. Thus, the next chapter examines the events surrounding the Memphis Massacre of 1866 to demonstrate how notions of place and belonging were contested in the neighborhood of South Memphis. An examination of local residents and military authorities’ interpretations of migrant behavior underscores how social fears influenced perceptions of place and stigmatized an entire community as dangerous to the social order. These images were contested by black migrants who expressed different levels of attachment to their surroundings in response to the violence that took place. In the end, African American men and women exhibited degrees of socialization the indicated their desire to lay down permanent social and cultural roots in Memphis.

If anything, the Memphis Massacre demonstrated the precarious nature of former slaves’ freedom and the importance of social and cultural autonomy to meet
the challenges of the post-slavery era. Despite the reality of racism and oppression, African Americans were able to overcome the social, economic, and physical boundaries of urban life. Therefore, chapter three examines the spatial relationships and interpersonal dynamics between African American men and women in neighborhoods to understand how former slaves created a spirit of connectedness and community over time. While concerned with physical proximity, these characteristics alone did not bring about neighborhoods. Rather, the social ties African Americans forged in the churches and civic organizations dispersed throughout the city helped facilitate the necessary reciprocal social relationships needed to produce nearness and feelings of belonging. As a consequence of these intrapersonal dynamics, patterns of neighborhood life created degrees of socialization that influenced civic engagement with the wider community. And, these personal relationships helped nurture a level of attachment to their communities that African Americans experienced and expressed in the political arena as they looked to carve out autonomous places in the new social order.

Finally, these social dynamics provide a way to explain former slaves’ mobilization and conduct in the political arena. Similar to freed people in areas across the South, chapter four addresses African Americans enthusiastic approach to popular politics in Memphis. Often, discounted and ignored by white conservatives and republicans, political mobilization depended on the initiatives of former slaves. An examination of political events in Memphis reveals the central organizing role neighborhood associations played in fostering political activism and turning
enthusiasm into electoral participation. Former slaves mobilized around their criticism of the antebellum social order and a distinct political community formed rooted in personal relationships, neighborhood associations, and shared feelings of civic responsibility. As a result, black Memphians used the vote to express their desire for independence and self-determination. Chapter six shows, in the end, how the failure to create a viable interracial democracy led black Memphians to look for ways to influence politics related to their own corporate interests. Even though they remained marginalized and excluded from the political decision making process, African Americans responded to issues that promised to give them more autonomy over their daily lives and recognized the social integrity of their communities.

1 Memphis Daily Appeal, December 9, 1874.
4 For discussions on the Republican Party’s inability to sustain biracial coalitions and implement lasting reforms see, for example, Edwards, Gendered Strife and Confusion; Harris, Day of the Carpetbagger; Thomas C. Holt, Black Over White: Negro Political Leadership in South Carolina during Reconstruction (Urbana: University of Illinois, 1977); Otto Olsen, A Carpetbagger’s Crusade: The Life of Albion Winegar Tourgee (Baltimore: John Hopkins University Press, 1965); Perman, The Road to Redemption.
6 Mark Pucell argues that it is important to study space and place rather the focusing solely upon social categories to understand political activism. See Mark Purcell, “Neighborhood Activism among Homeowners as a Politics of Space,” Professional Geographer 5, no. 2 (2001): 178-194.

differences. Michael Gomez, has explored in detail how African antecedents enabled enslaved people to overcome ethnic Foundations of Black America an African American cultural identity. See Sterling Stuckey, how African cultural traits remained salient in


Prior to the 1960s and 1970s, it was not uncommon for historians to approach slavery as a closed institution where slaves internalized a negative self-image and imitated the cultural and social expectations of white Southerners. Stanley Elkins approached slavery as a closed institution to analyze slave personalities. See Stanley Elkins, Slavery: A Problem in American Institutional and Intellectual Life (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1959). Scholars have longs since discounted this interpretation by focusing on African American agency and the cultural norms of enslaved people that enabled them to survive and resist the daily indignities of slavery. Two early examples included John W. Blassingame, The Slave Community: Plantation Life in the Antebellum South (New York: Oxford University Press, 1979) and Charles W. Joyner, Down by the Riverside: A South Carolina Slave Community (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1984).


Hahn, A Nation Under Our Feet; Hunter, To ‘Joy My Freedom; Saville, The Work of Reconstruction; Leslie A. Schwalm, A Hard Fight for We.

Hahn, A Nation Under Our Feet, 6.


19 The literature on twentieth century migrations from the South to the North and West is extensive. For an excellent study that roots working-class activism in the social and cultural traditions of black southerners and their struggles to reconstitute communities in the North see Kimberly L. Phillips, Alabama North: African American Migrants, Community, and Working-Class Activism in Cleveland, 1915-1945 (Urbana: University of Illinois, 1999).


21 More so than proximity, there are degrees of socialization and attachment that help facilitate the creation of neighborhoods. See, for example, Edward Casey, The Fate of Place: A Philosophical History (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1997); George Galster, “On the Nature of Neighborhood,” Urban Studies 38 (May 2001): 2111-2124; Ade Kearns and Michael Parkinson, “The Significance of Neighborhood,” Urban Studies 38 (August 2001): 2103-2110; Patricia Moore-Melvin, “Changing Contexts: Neighborhood Definition and Urban Organization,” American Quarterly 37, no. 3 (1985): 357-367. Recent studies on slavery and emancipation have emphasized both the importance of interpersonal relationships and place to understanding the social and physical boundaries that informed enslaved people’s daily lives. See Camp, Closer to Freedom; Anthony E. Kaye, Joining Places: Slave Neighborhoods in the Old South (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2007); Pennigroth, The Claims of Kinfolk. Contrary to Anthony E. Kaye’s assertions, however, neighborhood and community are not mutually exclusive categories. Rather neighborhoods provide an effective medium to examine the reciprocal relationships that helped establish a feeling of community.

22 For example, the black population of Atlanta rose from around 1,900 to 10,000 between 1860 and 1870. Hunter, To ‘Joy My Freedom, 21. A census order by the city council concluded that there were 10,995 African Americans in Memphis out of a total population of 27,703. See Job Bledsoe, Censuses of Memphis, 1865. However, a census taken by the Freedmen’s Bureau concluded that in Memphis and on President’s Island the total black population numbered 16,509. See, Freedmen’s Bureau Census, Records of the Memphis Sub-District, Reel 1, Memphis and Shelby County Public Library.


24 This study is influenced by Michel Foucault’s examination of power relationships. Foucault contends that the emergence a modern capitalist state transformed the customary rights of peasants into a threat to the entire social order. Migrants and vagrants were deemed dangerous precisely because they existed outside the boundaries of civil society. See Michel Foucault, Discipline and Punishment: The Birth of the Prison, trans. Alan Sheridan (New York: Vintage Books, 1977), 82-90.
Chapter 2: “Negroes in Our Midst”

When Louis Hughes was twelve years old he was separated from his mother and taken to a slave market in Richmond, Virginia. After a brief time with a local landowner, he was resold to a planter from northern, Mississippi. He lived on a plantation in Pontotoc, Mississippi for several years before being moved to Memphis, Tennessee. Hughes attempted to escape from bondage five times, while he was a slave in the Mississippi Valley. Although it was not until June 27, 1865, that Hughes was finally able to claim his freedom. Similar to other enslaved people during the Civil War, Hughes was relocated several times by his owners to avoid the advance of the Union Army. Despite the impending defeat of the Confederacy, slave owners in the southern interior placed more emphasis on enforcing the bonds of property. Slavery’s demise was inevitable, however, and sensing an opportunity Hughes and several others planned their escape. In the days preceding their escape, Hughes wrote, they “talked considerably about the Yankees, and how we might get away,” until one day they decided it was “time to make a start.” They traveled together over the rich, fertile plantations that had once been home to thousands of slaves and passed through numerous small towns that had been overrun by the Union Army before they “at last reach(ed) Memphis.” The city’s central location in the Mid-South and the presence of the Union Army made Memphis the destination for numerous freed people. In
Memphis they encountered a number of other former slaves they knew who abandoned southern plantations when the war began. Hughes noted upon his arrival that “the city was filled with slaves, from all over the south, who cheered and gave us a welcome.” And, once in Memphis, Hughes was able to secure freedom for his wife and children and begin a new life as a freeman. Hughes’ wartime journeys were similar to those of other slaves who abandoned the countryside and migrated to urban areas. Often, only after consultation with family, kin, and neighbors, did enslaved people from the cotton plantations of the Mid-South make their way toward freedom.

Hughes’ encounter with slavery and emancipation mirrored the experiences of countless enslaved people in the southern interior. In the antebellum period one million African Americans were sold into the domestic slave trade where they were dispersed throughout the Deep South to provide labor for the burgeoning cotton economy. Hughes, himself, was one of sixty slaves purchased by Edward Mckee and forced to travel by foot from Richmond, Virginia to northern Mississippi. The experience was traumatic. Not only was Hughes separated from his family, but he was also introduced to an unfamiliar working environment. Hughes noted, in Virginia “there were no extensive cotton plantations, as in Mississippi.” Yet, despite the social and cultural displacement that accompanied slavery’s expansion into the southern interior, enslaved people were able to reconstitute familiar social relationships and sustain cultural traditions independent of southern slave owners. Informal social gatherings allowed enslaved people to establish bonds of fellowship. “On our plantation passes were never given,” Hughes observed, “but the slaves did
visit in the neighboring plantations notwithstanding, and would sometimes slip into town at night.” Many of these meetings were for religious purposes, while others were simply social gatherings that enabled black people to momentarily shed their slave status. When slaves gathered on Mckee’s plantation, Hughes noted, they often “gathered in groups, talking, laughing” and “telling tales that they had heard from their grandfather.” These cooperative associations helped link the individual to the community and promoted a desire for self-determination made visible during the Civil War.

The wartime migrations of freed people, therefore, ushered in a renewed struggle over community and former slaves’ proper place in their new surroundings. And, while scholars have focused upon the wartime migrations of enslaved people and the conflict between slaves and masters over the meaning of freedom during the Civil War era, more still remains to be uncovered on the impact of emancipation on regional understandings of race and place. Even though white Southerners maintained slavery through the practice of coercion, there often existed what Michel Foucault identified as a “space of tolerance,” either by law or custom that was essential to the economic and political stability of the social order. Whether these customary rights were gained by resistance or negotiation, enslaved people found ways of operating within slavery to maintain autonomous social relationships. The war upset this social equilibrium and transformed these once “tolerated illegalities” into a threat not just to the individual slave owner, but the entire community. African American expressions of autonomy were now considered tantamount to attacking the entire social body,
therefore, white residents responded by demanding tighter controls placed on the black community at-large. As a result, notions of place were tied more closely around local understandings of race, severely limiting freed people’s ability to reconstitute a sense of community in their new social surroundings.  

Located on the fourth Chickasaw bluff above the floodplain of the Mississippi River, the settlement and development of Memphis provides insight on the impact of territorial expansion, economic growth, and demographic change on evolving definitions of race and place in the nineteenth century. In many ways, Memphis had more in common with the nation’s port and river cities than the urban centers of the southern interior. For the first two decades after the city’s founding in 1819 Memphis grew slowly until the 1840s and 1850s when the arrival of the steamboat and railroad allowed Memphis to use its trading influence and take advantage of the importance of cotton to the American economy. Between 1850 and 1860 the city’s population increased from 8,841 to 22,623. In the 1850s, Memphis was the fastest growing city in the nation and much of this growth was the result of the arrival of immigrants, who accounted for more than 30% of the population in 1860. The German population increased from 470 in 1850 to 2,042 by 1860, while the Irish population increased from 876 to 5,242 during the same decade. Similar to other American cities, the city’s growth was accompanied by the proliferation of secret societies, mutual-aid organizations, and other voluntary associations. The number of churches increased from ten to twenty-one between the years 1850 and 1860, while the number of secret
societies and voluntary associations rose moderately from fourteen to sixteen during the same years. And the antebellum civil society reflected the diversity of the local population. On the eve of the Civil War there was one German benevolent society and newspaper, three Jewish voluntary associations, and ten different religious denominations, including a Jewish Synagogue, a Lutheran and a Roman Catholic Church. While indicative of an expansive civil society, nativism escalated in the decade before the Civil War reinforcing the public boundaries of white supremacy.

Local understandings of whiteness, however, were connected much more closely to the region’s dependence on slavery. Slavery was essential to the growth and development of the city. Slaves accounted for 17% of the population in 1860 and, in 1855, once the state of Tennessee removed restrictions on the interstate slave trade Memphis became the largest slave market in the Mid-South. More importantly, the city’s central location in the Mid-South and its access to the Mississippi River and the nation’s railroads enabled the “bluff city” to capitalize on the westward expansion of cotton and become the largest inland cotton market in the world. Plantation owners in northern Mississippi and southwestern Tennessee identified their economic success with the growth of Memphis. Benjamin Bedford, a plantation owner seventy-five miles south of Memphis, observed, “the prosperity of Memphis is my prosperity.” Even though Bedford was closer to the city of Holly Springs, Mississippi, he noted, the city’s location on the Mississippi River provided him and other landowners in the region with access to the national market economy. Others made similar observations. Louis Hughes wrote in his slave narrative that cotton harvested among slaves further
east in Pontotoc, Mississippi was also sent to the market in Memphis. What was once a small river town grew to be the sixth largest city in the American South by 1860.

And, while early white settlers approach to the region’s black population shared common characteristics with the fluid social relations of the nation’s frontier, racial categories became much more restrictive as the slave population expanded. When Tennessee became a state in 1796 it was one of the few states that allowed free black men to vote. In 1825, Tennessee was also one of only six states that had no property qualifications for voting. And, because Tennessee had a small black population, race relations in the state were relatively fluid. In the early nineteenth century Tennessee more resembled a frontier than a slave state and, as a result, slaves often lived in small groups working closely together with whites. In Memphis, historical scholarship suggests race relations were also moderate. The city’s first mayor, for example, was reportedly married to a free black woman, Mary Winchester. And, similar to other interracial relationships, it appears the relationship was tolerated by white Memphians. Frances Wright’s utopian community of Nashoba established for emancipated slaves also peacefully coexisted with the citizen’s of Shelby County for a brief period. Race relations and the attitude of white Southerners towards African Americans became more intolerant, however, during the second quarter of the nineteenth century. The Winchesters were forced to move out of the city into the county after the passage of a stronger city ordinance against interracial unions in 1837.
And residents in Shelby County became increasingly hostile towards Wright’s Nashoba community contributing to the reasons for her departure.¹⁷

Throughout the antebellum era, a number of new laws were passed in the state of Tennessee aimed at limiting the freedoms of the region’s African American population. Similar to other southern states, after Nat Turners revolt resulted in the killing of fifty-seven white men, women, and children in Virginia, white Tennesseans became increasingly fearful of a large free black population. In 1834, provisions in the new state constitution prohibited the emancipation of slaves “without the consent of their owner or owners” and free blacks were denied the right to vote. How to limit the number of free blacks in the state remained a subject of concern among whites as well. In 1849, the state adopted an old provision that allowed for the emancipation of slaves only if, once freed, they left the state, while, in 1852, a state law required former owners of emancipated slaves to pay for their removal to Africa. New laws to oversee the slave population were also constantly amended as the African American population in Tennessee continued to grow. In the nineteenth century, for example, the state legislature looked for ways to centralize powers of slave patrols, enforce proper pass regulations and expedite the return of the runaway slaves to their owners, prevent the selling of liquor to slaves, and minimize the chances of a slave insurrection.¹⁸ Much of this new legislation reflected the demographic changes that accompanied the expansion of slavery into Tennessee and the southern interior. While the number of free blacks in Tennessee rose from 309 in 1800 to 4,555 by 1840, the number rose to only 5,524 in 1850 and 7,300 in 1860.¹⁹ The slave population,
however, increased from 141,603 to 275,719 between 1830 and 1860. These new laws and provisions were therefore created to maintain white Southerners’ authority over a growing black population, the majority of whom were enslaved people.

Many of the antebellum state and city regulations were designed to restrict the public life of African Americans in towns and urban centers. In Tennessee, in 1831, the Tennessee slave code imposed a punishment of twenty-five lashes on any “suspicious looking slaves” meeting at a “suspicious place” at unlawful hours. Southern towns passed similar laws to prevent slaves from congregating. In Mississippi, one town passed a law to “rid the community of the intolerable pest of having our streets filled up with trading carts and noisy and drunken negroes on the Sabbath.” And, in Memphis, white Southerners became increasingly concerned about the movements and social interactions among African Americans. Few African Americans lived in Memphis during the first two decades after the city’s founding; however, once the city established itself as a trading center for the region its black population grew. By 1850 there were 2,486 African Americans in Memphis and 3,882 by 1860. The overwhelming majority were enslaved. There were only 126 free black men and women in 1850 and 198 in 1860. It was during this formative period, one historian observes, that local officials looked for ways to tighten restrictions on the African American population in Memphis. City officials strengthened enforcement of provisions that prohibited slaves from hiring out their own time without their owner’s permission, passed new ordinances designed to prevent slaves from living away from their owners, made laws punishing the selling of liquor to slaves more
stringent, and, in 1856, passed a new ordinance that prohibited African Americans from preaching to black congregations. In addition, curfews for free blacks were implemented and laws designed to prevent slaves and free blacks from congregating together without permission were enforced.\textsuperscript{25} Therefore, on the eve of the Civil War, anecdotal evidence suggests African American access to public space became more circumscribed.

Although the informal contours of daily life suggest these legal proscriptions were often not enforced, especially in urban areas. Throughout the antebellum period, white residents often complained about the unwillingness of the city’s slave and free black population to abide by these regulations. Their complaints about the failure of local officials and slave owners to adequately control the black population in Memphis also spoke to the degree of black space white residents allowed to exist. In the 1840s and 1850s, black drinking shops continued to exist and it was not uncommon for slaves to hire themselves out without their owner’s permission. The arrest of slaves living away from their owners was also not uncommon, despite city regulations to the contrary that prohibited such behavior. And it was not unusual for slaves and free blacks to be seen gathering together in public spaces in and around Memphis. The increasing number of regulations aimed at controlling the movements and actions of African Americans suggest slaves and free blacks were able to carve out a public presence in southern life.\textsuperscript{26} While no means an example of racial equality, this “space of tolerance” was undoubtedly central to the social and political stability of the city. By allowing these laws to fall into periods of abeyance, authorities allowed African
Americans a modicum of autonomy, thus minimizing popular disturbances over the boundaries of race and place. The arrival of migrants from the countryside during the Civil War, however, altered this dynamic, making once tolerated illegalities a threat to the social order.

One of the most significant developments that occurred during the Civil War was the wartime migrations of black Southerners that accompanied the advance of the Union Army and occupation throughout the Mississippi River Valley. In February of 1862, federal forces captured Fort Henry and Fort Donelson giving the Union control of the Tennessee and Cumberland Rivers. And, after Confederate forces were forced to retreat during the Battle of Shiloh in April of that year, control of the Mississippi Valley was made possible. Following the Battle of Shiloh, the Union army captured Memphis, New Orleans, and Corinth. And, while the Union controlled most of the Mississippi Valley it was not until July 4, 1863, when the Confederacy surrendered Vicksburg, that federal forces gained access to the entire Mississippi River. The movement of the Union Army was frequently observed by slaves. Charlie Jones remembered seeing soldiers returning to Memphis after capturing Vicksburg during his childhood. “I member we chilluns run out to the road and got upon the bards and watched em go by,” Jones stated. And many slaves equated soldiers’ presence with freedom. Louis Hughes wrote that he listened out for any news about the war, stating, “I was so eager for the success of the Union cause.” As a result, slaves in the Mississippi Valley began abandoning their owners’ plantations, at first gradually, and
then maturing into a mass movement. By 1863, one plantation owner observed that in Holly Springs, Mississippi white Southerners had “lost every negro,” while John Houston Bills of southwestern Tennessee frequently commented on the “immense stampede” of runaway slaves throughout the war.30 While the constant references by white Southerners to the mass “exodus” of slave men and women in the region gives the impression of the capricious nature of these wartime migrations, the movement of African Americans was anything but random. Slaves’ geographical proximity to federally controlled areas, the progress of the war, and social dynamics in the slave community all influenced freed peoples’ path toward freedom.31

Similar to other cities in the American South, Memphis was a destination for thousands of black migrants.32 On June 6, 1862, the city of Memphis fell to federal troops and, while African Americans’ slave status was initially supported by military authorities, they received additional protections in October of 1862 when the federal government took over local law enforcement and ordered slaves to be treated as free persons. In addition, the city had three contraband camps, was the center for the recruitment of black soldiers in West Tennessee, and had three regiments of black soldiers stationed in Memphis at Fort Pickering by the end of the Civil War.33 These factors combined made Memphis an ideal location for former slaves. And, while it is impossible to determine the numerical progression of the black migrant population in Memphis throughout the war, available census data does reveal the tremendous impact these Civil War era migrations had on the city of Memphis. Between 1860 and 1865 the Memphis black population increased from 3,882 to over 16,000.34 As a result,
when Louis Hughes arrived in the city of Memphis after the war, he noted, that “the
city was filled with slaves, from all over the south, who cheered and gave us
welcome.”

Throughout the war, white Southerners and the local press repeatedly voiced concern about the increasing number of freed people in the city. In the summer of 1862, the Memphis Daily Avalanche reported that a “number of runaways” were “at large in the city and the vicinity.” This freed population included migrants and the city’s antebellum slave population as well. Many were undoubtedly like Albert Harris, a long-time slave in Memphis, who stated, he “got tired of living that way, and quit” during the Civil War. And, once federal authorities took control over the city, the Memphis slave population began abandoning their former owners. By the spring of 1863, the press reported that “the greater part of the slave population had either left the city for the North, or is wandering about the streets.” As a result, while it is not clear how many of the city’s former slave population remained in Memphis; a portion of the Civil War era black population undoubtedly included members of the antebellum slave population. It was the influx of black migrants from the southern interior, however, that radically reordered public life in Memphis.

African Americans throughout the Mississippi River Valley arrived in the city during and immediately after the Civil War, especially from areas in close proximity. Although it is difficult to determine the pre-war origins of the Civil War era black population of Memphis, census data does suggest that the majority of black migrants originated from the surrounding cotton plantations of the Mid-South. For instance,
while the 1870 federal census does not distinguish between wartime and postwar migrations, it does reveal that the majority of black Memphians born before the war were originally from Tennessee and Mississippi. Slightly less than half (47%) were born in Tennessee, while 14% were born in Mississippi. These numbers do not account for the multiple intra-regional migrations that accompanied antebellum slavery; however it does suggest that most black migrants were raised on cotton plantations in the southern interior. Of the remainder, 13% were from Kentucky, Alabama, and Georgia, while another 13% were born in Virginia and 7% were born in North and South Carolina.  

Many of these African Americans most likely either accompanied slave owners who relocated their fledging plantation operations from the Upper South to the Mississippi Valley or were sold as slaves to aspiring planters in the region during the antebellum era. Louis Hughes, for example, was only twelve years old when he was sold in Richmond, Virginia to a plantation owner from northern Mississippi. His wife, on the other hand, had been separated from her family in Kentucky and sold to Hughes’ owner in Memphis. Countless other African Americans followed a similar migration pattern. As a result census data suggests not only that most of the city’s black migrant population originated from the surrounding cotton plantations of the Mid-South, but that many formerly enslaved men and women of Memphis could trace back their history or their family’s to the expansion of slavery into the southern interior prior to the Civil War.

Most likely, a significant portion of former slaves came to Memphis from the surrounding cotton plantations of southwestern Tennessee and northern Mississippi.
suggesting the movements of freed people were not necessarily random and spontaneous. The local press continued to carry runaway slave advertisements for slaves from neighboring counties during the early stages of the war. But, while most evidence is merely suggestive, it is possible to extrapolate more affirmative information from Freedmen Bureau Records. For example, a number of the deposit slips from the Freedman’s Savings and Trust Bank provide detailed information on the origins of the city’s African American population who migrated to Memphis during or immediately after the war. In an examination of 1,957 individuals, where biographical data was available, African Americans migrated to Memphis from over 450 different counties throughout the American South. The majority, however, were from Tennessee and Mississippi, including 40% who migrated to Memphis from the cotton producing counties of southwestern Tennessee and northern Mississippi. As a result this demographic information suggests that while slave men and women migrated to Memphis from places all over the southern interior, migrants from the surrounding plantations of the Mid-South had the most significant impact on the growth of the city’s new black population, meaning they shared similar experiences in slavery and freedom.

 Why did slave men and women migrate to Memphis? A number of slave men and women who migrated to Memphis were most likely familiar with the city prior to the war. Throughout the antebellum period, over one million slaves were bought and sold in the southern interior, and many slaves experienced the slave trade in urban slave markets along the Mississippi River. And, in 1855, once the state-wide ban on
the interstate slave trade was lifted in Tennessee, Memphis became the largest slave market in the Mid-South. Southern landowners from the surrounding cotton plantations quickly took advantage of their close proximity to the emerging slaves trading firms on Adams Street in Memphis. For example, between 1856 and 1859 Francis Lake made six trips to Memphis and purchased a total of 45 slaves. And slave narratives document the African American experience with the slave market in Memphis as well. Emmett Beal, a former slave, recounted that his father was sold at an auction in Memphis to a planter in Bolivar, Tennessee, while the rest of his family was sent to Arkansas. Virginia Davis’ grandmother was separated from her family and sold at an auction in Memphis when she was only twelve years old. On the eve of the Civil War this familiarity with the urban slave markets of Memphis was shared by a number of slave men and women in the Mississippi Valley, and, for many, may have been the last place where they saw members of their family.

Memphis was also a destination for runaway slaves prior to the war. The city’s close proximity to the surrounding cotton plantations of the Mid-South and its location on the Mississippi River made the city a destination for runaway slaves. Because the city was a river town, the constant in and out migration of river workers and the population of slaves hired-out for cheap labor may have enabled some runaway slaves the opportunity to blend in with the local population. However, it was the river traffic on the Mississippi River that offered the best chance for freedom. In Louis Hughes’ slave narrative he writes that one fellow slave was able to forge a pass and find work on a ship headed for New Orleans. Once in New Orleans he boarded an
ocean vessel to Boston and from there made his way to Canada. Hughes, himself, hid-out on a ship loaded with sugar only to be discovered. Hughes, nicknamed “Memphis” by his captors, was returned to his owner in Louisville, Kentucky.  

These incidents suggest that not only was slave flight common, even if unsuccessful, in the Mississippi Valley, but that slaves were aware of the world outside their community and the strategies slaves employed, and the paths they traveled, were most likely familiar during the war.

Many slaves were cognizant of Memphis because of the city’s commercial importance to the region as the largest inland cotton market in the United States. Molly Finley, a former slave from Pine Bluff, Arkansas, recounted, that her owner “made several trips to Memphis,” because crops were sent to the city to be sold and transported by the river. And it was not uncommon for slave men and women to travel with their owners to Memphis. Many slaves traveled to Memphis to help transport cotton to the market and during the war their geographical knowledge of the region made them important guides for slaves seeking to escape from the cotton plantations of the Mid-South. For example, Louis Hughes made several unsuccessful attempts to escape slavery. And, in one escape attempt during the war, Hughes and several other slaves planned their escape and designated “Uncle Alfred” to be their leader. “Alfred,” Hughes wrote, “had been a teamster” for years and, Hughes continued, he was “familiar with the road, as he had hauled cotton into Memphis for his master for so long a time he could hardly tell when he began.” While it is impossible to determine whether or not slaves’ awareness of Memphis and the region
made their decision to migrate to Memphis during the war likely, it invariably helped facilitate the wartime movements of slaves.

Black Southerners often learned about the war through the same social structures and informal communal networks that informed their daily lives as slaves in ways that began laying down the foundations for new migrant communities. White Southerners did their best to keep slaves from learning about the war, but, as Maria White, a former slave, noted, “they couldn’t keep that from our ears.” “There was so much talking going on,” White observed. News often circulated among slaves by word-of-mouth and spread from family and kin to neighboring plantations. “They just passed the word ‘round,” Anna Hall remembered. Similar to the oral traditions and religious culture sustained outside the supervision of white southerners, knowledge about the war was shared clandestinely. “They passed it ‘round secretly,” one former slave remembered, and, as the war progressed, news circulated that the war was about ending slavery. Lillie Williams noted slaves in Mississippi moved from place to place, always whispering “we goiner be set free.” Emma Barr, a former slave from Arkansas, remembered that slaves on the plantation gathered together to talk about freedom. Not unlike the religious and social gatherings during slavery, “they turned an iron pot upside down in the room,” to prevent others from overhearing their discussion. Similarly, Laura Abromson noted, during the war slaves “stole out in some of their houses and turned the washpot down at the door” and prayed for freedom. What once served as a religious gathering to affirm slaves’ spiritual beliefs and corporate identity now became a secret meeting to share news about the war.
Slaves therefore approached emancipation in ways congruent with their own social practices and cultural beliefs evidenced in their private, and often hidden, lives as enslaved people.

The war, however, represented a watershed moment in American history, when the private lives and clandestine activities of southern slaves became public. Throughout the war, not only were whisperings about freedom common, but they increasingly became a matter of public discourse among slaves. Silas Know learned about the war and emancipation while sitting with his grandfather who was sharing information about the war with other slaves in the community. In Lara Gilliam’s slave community black people congregated around one slave who could read and share news about the war. In Lara Montgomery’s family heard about freedom from slaves on neighboring plantations. And, wherever enslaved people gathered, one former slave noted, overseers struggled to make the crowd disperse. Slave owners looked to enforce more strictly laws and customs prohibiting these informal gatherings; however, as the war progressed, enslaved people no longer felt the need to hide their collective aspirations for self-determination. Indeed, while not without its challenges, it became easier for slaves to assemble together and exchange opinions about the war and the possibility of their freedom.

Slaves had always challenged the authority of white plantation owners, whether it was through clandestine gatherings or daily acts of resistance, but as plantation discipline began to breakdown further slave owners struggled to tighten the bonds of property. White southerners increasingly noted slaves’ unwillingness to
work. Slaves were “demoralized and lost for further use” John Houston Bills of Bolivar, Tennessee observed. As a result many southern landowners were reluctant to participate in the war for fear of the further breakdown of labor discipline. Benjamin Bedford of northern Mississippi claimed that because slaves were “demoralized” white supervision was needed to make certain work continued on southern plantations. Instead of fighting in the war, many southern landowners chose to stay home and protect their property. Other slave owners in the Mississippi Valley decided to move their slaves further south. Prior to the arrival of federal forces in Memphis, Louis Hughes was removed by his owner further south into Mississippi, and eventually by the close of the war, as far south as Mobile, Alabama. Many slaves were also removed to Texas where they remained until the end of the war. Throughout slavery, white Southerners consistently tried to circumscribe the movement and public life of slaves and they continued these efforts during the war. Nothing, however, was more symbolic of the breakdown of plantation discipline and the growing assertiveness of slave men and women than the wartime migrations that accompanied the Civil War.

Slave flight was common during the war. And these wartime migrations often underscored the importance of family and community networks and took place only after consultation with others in the slave community. For the majority of former slaves the decision to migrate represented a cooperative decision to free themselves. Many slave men and women chose to leave their owner’s plantations immediately after learning either about the war or emancipation. Evie Herrin, a former slave,
observed that as soon as her family learned about freedom they left, while Maria White remembered that “quick as ma heard it, she left de place.” Other slaves, however, exhibited caution and chose to remain near family and friends. Similar to runaway slaves in the antebellum era, many chose to hide-out in the woods. Wesley Graves, a former slave, remembered that during the war his father ran off and stayed in the woods nearby. This was often noted by white Southerners. One slave owner in middle Tennessee observed that by the summer of 1863 slaves were scattered throughout wooded areas. And, for many slaves in the Mid-South, emancipation was a collective endeavor. Throughout the south, southern landowners frequently observed the mass migrations of enslaved men and women and evidence suggests the decision to free themselves was often planned in consultation with family members and the community. It was not unusual for slaves to abandon plantations together in the middle of the night. For example, in Bolivar, Tennessee, slaves from four plantations abandoned their owners simultaneously late one evening. And slave men and women migrating throughout the southern interior often traveled together. Some, as Violent Shaw observed, “got on the road just walking.” Susan Jones of Panola County, Mississippi remarked that one Sunday morning everyone on her plantation walked together to Hernando, Mississippi where they stayed all night before they “walked to Memphis the next day.” Slaves did not always leave their owner’s plantations merely as individuals, but rather they often abandoned the countryside as entire communities. Therefore social ties within slave communities were not
completely severed with emancipation and they remained important for freed men and women to maintain in urban areas like Memphis when they arrived.

Other black migrants arrived in Memphis after either running away to join the Union Army or being relocated by federal authorities. The majority of black soldiers were from southern states and in Tennessee, for example, over 20,000 African American men joined the Union Army. Julius Jones, a former slave from Arkansas, observed that on his plantation when the war began “all the men on the place run off and joined the northern army.” And, this decision among slaves was frequently observed by white Southerners. In southwestern Tennessee, John Houston Bills complained that the region’s slave population were “desiring an excuse to run away and join the Northern Army,” which, he noted, “many of them are doing.” Others were taken by military authorities as the Union Army advanced throughout the Mid-South. In one instance, John Houston Bills observed, over 900 slaves were carried away on a train to Memphis. In northern Mississippi, one white Southerner reported that over one thousand slaves accompanied the Union Army when they left the area. Many were undoubtedly relocated to the city’s contraband camps. Sally Dixon, a former slave, noted that her family was taken to Memphis where, she noted, “they had a place for us to stay.” Yet, in Memphis, a number were also conscripted into the Union Army. For example, once in Memphis, Dixon stated, “they made my father a soldier, and he stayed in the army in Memphis til the war was over.” This experience was shared by numerous slaves. In the spring of 1863, the Memphis Daily Appeal reported that two regiments of black soldiers were being formed in Memphis.
“from contrabands that reach the city and who are forced to enter the services.”

And, by the end of the war three regiments of black soldiers were stationed in Memphis. But, even though these wartime migrations were more dependent on the movements and actions of military authorities, they still represented a conscious decision among slaves to abandon the cotton plantations of the Mississippi Valley and shed their former slave status.

These wartime migrations also reveal how family and community influenced the different emancipation experiences of men and women in the region. While black men were more likely to leave when the war first began, slave flight was common among African American women as well. And, as the war progressed, the “mass exodus” of slaves noted by white Southerners included men and women. In the winter of 1862, John Houston Bills observed that when the Union Army moved throughout the Mid-South they were accompanied by “old men and women, young men and girls, children and infants too numerous too count.” But, unlike men, it was more common for women to abandon southern plantations with their families. For example, Laura Montgomery observed, that “one night my mammy an’ we chilluns slipped off” in the middle of the night. As a result, in Memphis, the black migrant population included men, women, and children. Many of these black women were relocated to the city’s contraband camps, while a number of black women migrated to the city to join their husbands who were serving in the Union Army. Military authorities repeatedly expressed concern about the large population of black women, who refused to live in contraband camps, and, instead chose to remain near their
husbands in make-shift tents around Fort Pickering. And, many other black women served in the Union Army as cooks and washerwomen. But, slave women were also more likely to remain on southern plantations for the duration of the war. Many did not join their husbands until after the war. Patsy Moore, a former slave from northern Mississippi, remembered that as soon as her father was able he sent a wagon to bring her and her family to Memphis where he was stationed. While the exact number of black women who migrated to Memphis during and immediately after the Civil War is difficult to assess, the 1865 census reveals that over 50% of the city’s African American population were women.

The African American population in Memphis was therefore diverse and, in addition to the city’s antebellum free black and former slave population, it included countless black migrants from the Mississippi River Valley as well. And, an examination of emancipation in the Mid-South reveals that while slave men and women approached the Civil War in multiple ways, their path toward freedom was far from random and dependent on the progress of the war, their proximity to Memphis, and social relationships within the slave community. As a consequence, new arrivals shared a common history in slavery in the southern interior and the wartime displacement that accompanied the advance of the Union Army and its occupation of the Mississippi Delta. These experiences provided the social and cultural strength to construct new identities as free people struggled to reconstitute a sense of place and community in their new surroundings. Strength needed in the face of mounting opposition from local residents and military authorities alike.
Local residents responded to these wartime migrations with a renewed sense of urgency to enforce laws and legislations to control the burgeoning black population. Immediately after the fall of Memphis to federal forces the local press frequently noted the increasing number of runaway slaves in Memphis. Throughout the summer of 1862, local authorities struggled to control the migrations of slave men and women into the city. Arrests were frequent. On June 11, 1862, the Memphis Daily Avalanche reported that “the police have arrested from fifty to seventy-five runaways during the last few days, and there are still a large number who are still at large.”83 And, that same month, the Avalanche reported that “scarcely a day passes that there are not from ten to a dozen runaways arrested.”84 Memphis residents were unsuccessful in their efforts, however, and they increasingly looked to federal authorities to enforce local, state, and federal antebellum slave laws. But even though military authorities were still under orders not to protect slaves from their owners, they provided little support to local authorities looking to limit the influx of migrants and return them to their owners. This was a source of constant frustration for many white Memphians. For example, in September of 1862 a group of citizens met with the Mayor to petition federal authorities to appoint a commissioner to enforce the Fugitive Slave Act of 1850.

The citizens of Memphis respectfully beg leave to state that at this time there are within the limits of the city a large number of negroes of both sexes, old and young: that said negroes have escaped from their owners; that repeated applications have been made to Major General Sherman restore said negroes to their lawful owners, but that by the laws of the land the general is not allowed to use any force or authority for the purpose of
delivering up fugitives from labor, that at this time, the courts of this state for the city of Memphis and for the county of Shelby are in a state of disorganization, and that as there is no legally constituted tribunal or court before which the cases as above named may be laid, your petitioners ask for the appointment of a commissioner that he may be immediately appointed and duly commissioned to carry into effect the act of Congress as before referred to, and that your honor will make all necessary orders in the premises as will promote the interests of the people of this portion of the state. 85

This focus on the stricter and tighter control of the black population led white Memphians to tie notions of place more firmly around understandings of race.

While military authorities began reevaluating the status of the enslaved population and gradually moving towards a policy of emancipation, federal officials approached escaped slaves as refugees under wartime supervision. 86 The status of former slaves in Memphis remained unclear throughout the duration of the war. When Major General William T. Sherman became military commander in Memphis in July of 1862 he refused to offer protection to runaway slaves; instead, in some instances, military authorities cooperated with the local police in returning slaves to their owners. 87 But, similar to other military commanders, as Major General Sherman began to realize the military advantage accorded to the Union by encouraging slavery’s demise, former slaves were able to find refuge in Memphis. For instance, in the summer of 1862, the military in Memphis increasingly relied on slave men and women for labor. Many worked on military fortifications and as teamsters and cooks. They were, however, to be paid by rations and not by wages until, it was ordered, “the courts determine whether a negro is slave or free.” 88 And, while the military took over control of local law enforcement, in October of 1862, and ordered slaves to be treated as free persons, they remained under the constant supervision of military authorities in
Memphis. The Emancipation Proclamation did not apply to the state of Tennessee and, instead, slaves in Memphis were protected under the provisions of the Second Confiscation Act. As a result, slave men and women in Memphis were protected from their former owners, but, as contraband, they were effectively still perceived as “property” and subject to the control of the military.

Because the legal status of former slaves remained subject to the control of federal authorities, former slaves’ efforts to appropriate space were contested. Thousands of former slaves found refuge in contraband camps and worked for the Union Army, while many more refused to reside under military supervision and lived outside the camps in and around Memphis. African American men found work as barbers, carpenters, shoemakers, and draymen, while black women labored as cooks or did washing and ironing. In response to these actions, authorities required former slaves living and working in the city to carry a pass attesting to their employment. Many refused to follow military orders, however. And, as the war progressed and the number of black migrants in the city increased, both local residents and military authorities expressed concern and looked for ways to assert control over the city’s growing population of freed people. In the summer of 1863, employers were ordered to reregister blacks under their employment with the Provost Marshall to issue a new certificate. Those former slaves in the city without proper documentation were to be arrested and removed to contraband camps. This, the Memphis Daily Bulletin responded, was in response to the large number of “negroes in our midst.” This policy continued after the war. But, despite these efforts to circumscribe the freedoms
of former slaves, many freed people remained unwilling to comply with military authorities and any form of white supervision.

White southerners’ impressions of former slaves open displays of autonomy in public underscored the inability of municipal and federal authorities to uphold racial boundaries.\textsuperscript{92} When Elizabeth Meriwether, the wife of a prominent slave owner and colonel in the Confederate Army, returned to Memphis after the Civil War she observed not only “blue uniformed soldiers swaggering” in the streets, but also the “ugly, gaudily dressed negro women.”\textsuperscript{93} Other white residents complained about what they charged was the “hostile attitude” among freed people exhibited toward whites.\textsuperscript{94} As proof they pointed to the frequent conflicts that occurred between white Memphians and former slaves. For example, a physical confrontation reportedly ensued after a group of African Americans began using “insulting language” toward a former Confederate soldier and called him a “damn rebel.”\textsuperscript{95} Or, in other instances, the Memphis \textit{Daily Argus} observed, white Memphians were often “shoved off the side-walks when there is plenty of room for both parties.”\textsuperscript{96} Prior to the war, such offenses in Memphis were punishable by whippings. The large number of black migrants, federal occupation and the presence of African Americans soldiers, however, helped make former slaves more willing to assert themselves in public.

What were once tolerated illegalities were now considered an immediate threat to the entire social body. Slavery was predicated on the white paternalistic belief that African Americans were unable to care for themselves, and many white Southerners believed that the demise of slavery would be accompanied by an increase in criminal
activity. Since African Americans were no longer held in slavery their behavior was under constant scrutiny. And, while most freed people labored for the Union Army, relied on federal relief, and looked for work to support themselves, white Memphians often exaggerated wartime incidents of theft and pilfering. Local residents repeatedly expressed concern at the increasing number of former slaves in Memphis, who, they charged, had a propensity to idleness and committing crimes. In response to these concerns, the city passed an ordinance to increase the size of the police force from thirty-two to one hundred. As a result, the number of arrests of African American men and women increased. In the first six months after federal occupation the arrest of African Americans accounted for less than ten percent of the city police force’s monthly arrests. But, as the number of black migrants rose, the arrest of African Americans increased as well. An examination of two and half years of arrest records during the war reveal that twenty-four percent of those arrested were African Americans. The increasing number of arrests of African American men and women undoubtedly contributed to the public perception that former slaves were prone to lawlessness. Shortly after the war, the Memphis Daily Argus reported that “Negro crime is frequent and aggravating” and concluded that “very near half of the cases of drunkenness, fighting, disorderly conduct, stealing, etc. are negroes.” Many of these arrests were invariably the result of migrants becoming increasingly assertive in claiming their freedom, yet the arrest of African Americans was proportional to the overall population. Instead, this editorial revealed white Southerners tendency to equate all forms of black autonomy as dangerous to society.
The influx of black migrants continued to be a source of concern for local residents and federal officials after the war. For many former slaves Memphis remained preferable to the cotton plantations of the Mid-South. But, while black migrants searched for employment not related to plantation labor, white Southerners and military authorities remained unwilling to accept black southerners as anything but agricultural laborers. Many shared the same opinion as General Nathan A. M. Dudley, superintendent for the Freedmen’s Bureau Sub-district of Memphis, who, in September of 1865, wrote that there was “a surplus population of at least six thousand colored persons women and children in and about Memphis who have no visible means of support.” And, he concluded, that “many of this number are lazy, worthless vagrants who will never be induced to leave the life they are now leading except by use of force, as long as they can beg, steal, or obtain sufficiencies to sustain life.”101 Others made similar conclusions. General David Tillson argued that because the black population was “so large” many were unable to find adequate means of support. Tillson concluded later that summer, that it may be necessary “to use military force” to remove this population of former slaves to the countryside.102 And, similar to other urban areas, the Freedmen’s Bureau in Memphis came to support a policy of removing black migrants from the city to the surrounding rural areas where their labor was needed. In the summer of 1865, orders were made to encourage those former slaves without means of support to leave the city and “go to the country.”103 Numerous former slaves refused to comply with the Freedmen’s Bureau appeal to move to rural areas. Throughout the fall of 1865, military officials made a
concerted effort to relocate this “surplus” population to rural areas where their labor was needed. On September 10, 1865, General David Tillson’s filed a report with his superiors that summarized this policy’s failure. Tillson observed that even though large numbers of freed people were offered employment for good wages they refused. Instead, Tillson concluded, most former slaves preferred to remain in Memphis and “rely on such a precarious living as they can make in the city.”

By September of 1865, patrols were sent out daily to round up “the loose, idle, and vagrant freed people” congregating in and around Memphis to explain to them that there were good wages to be made on the surrounding cotton plantations of the Mississippi Delta. They were unsuccessful, however. And, the continuing refusal of freed people to sign labor contracts with plantation owners led Freedmen Bureau officials to rely increasingly on force and arrests of former slaves with no visible means of support.

The constant attention to the supervision and control of the migrant population also led to the erosion of privileges antebellum black Memphians had grown accustomed to expecting. Many of the city’s small antebellum free black population and inchoate middle-class objected to what they perceived as the Freedmen’s Bureau indiscriminate policy of removal. In September of 1865, one federal official observed that the military’s use of force was upsetting many of the city’s “honest colored citizens.” During a meeting with military officials, a delegation of “the most respectable and intelligent portion of the colored citizens” expressed their concerns with the Freedmen Bureau’s policy and federal officials assured them that the practice of arresting vagrants would not be an “inconvenience” to them. In exchange, this
delegation of African Americans offered “cordial support in ridding the city of this idle class of persons.” Many of these “influential” African Americans were undoubtedly interested in protecting their own marginal status and social position as “leaders” in the black community. And, as a result, they were more willing to work with white officials. In the months that followed, while the federal government was unable to secure “active cooperation” from “influential” black Memphians, Major A. T. Reeve wrote on January 3, 1866 that their “sympathies” and “well wishes” are “readily at my service.”

Throughout the Civil War period and its immediate aftermath, both the private and public lives of African American men and women remained subject to coercion. Their economic opportunities were limited, they were forced to carry passes attesting to their new legal status, and their movements were subject to the daily harassment of the local police and military authorities. In many ways, while they were no longer considered the individual property of slave owners, they were approached as the public property of the entire white community. Yet, African Americans from the surrounding rural areas of the Mid-South continued to migrate to Memphis. The continuing in and out migration of black southerners from rural areas meant the African American community remained diverse and that former slaves approached freedom in multiple ways. But, in the process, even though former slaves remained marginalized in public life, they struggled to gain access to autonomous social spaces and weave together communities from the fabric of their former lives.
Former slaves undoubtedly chose to stay in Memphis because of the many advantages the city offered. While economic opportunities remained limited, migrants undeniably considered urban life preferable to the alternative in the rural countryside. Not only did many former slaves want nothing to do with plantation labor or anything that remotely resembled their formerly enslaved status, they were also subject to violent reprisals from plantation owners. In the year after the Civil War, Freedmen’s Bureau officials noted that the “numerous outrages” committed upon former slaves in the countryside resulted in the continuing influx of migrants who “seek protection within the limits of the city.” There were additional advantages to urban life. By January of 1865, for example, nine schools for African Americans were operating in Memphis. As a result, Brigadier General Benjamin P. Runkle, superintendent of the Freedmen’s Bureau of Shelby County, observed that while many freed people in Memphis become “vagrants and paupers” most migrate to the city for the purposes of attaining an education for their children and a better life for their family.\textsuperscript{108} The city also provided freed people with the opportunity to reconnect with family members. Albert Harris was “raised together” with his wife in Virginia, but they were “carried away from each other,” until the war when they were able to reunite in Memphis.\textsuperscript{109} And some of those freed persons who reunited in Memphis sought to validate their unions legally. As a result military observers noted the importance former slaves placed on their “marital relations” established during slavery.\textsuperscript{110}

But, more importantly, despite white Southerners and federal authorities’ efforts to the contrary, migrants strived to appropriate space away from white control.
Memphis lacked the adequate resources to deal with the influx of thousands of former slaves from the southern interior. Yet, most black migrants chose not live in contraband camps, but instead in crowded tenements and make shift-huts in the neighborhood known as South Memphis. This area surrounded Fort Pickering where African American soldiers were stationed. Military officials repeatedly criticized the tendency of former slaves to live in crowded conditions and congregate in small areas and identified this as a potential health problem and a reason to advocate for their removal. Regardless of these concerns, close quarters provided the friends and relatives of black soldiers and thousands of migrants the opportunity to reconstitute communities. Since most freed people arrived in Memphis with few material possessions, they made do with whatever building material they could find. For example, the wives of black soldiers took supplies from Fort Pickering. Not unlike the customary rights former slaves claimed on southern plantations to furnish their cabins and feed their families, these tactics were now considered a threat and a violation of the sanctity of private property, military officials complained. They charged, freed people “carry off axes, shovels, spades and picks where they can be found, to use in building, and maintaining these households.” Other black migrants pooled their resources together to survive, often living in close proximity to one another and sharing living quarters with friends and families. They also planted gardens in the area to deal with the shortage of food and lack of economic opportunities. It was here, outside the supervision of federal authorities where, as one historian contends, what
remained of plantation communities “merged and blended” with migrant communities forming an intricate network of kin and family with new friends and neighbors. Former slave men and women were also able to carve out an increment of social autonomy in the saloons and dances halls of South Memphis. Many of the city’s new black entrepreneurs, such as Robert R. Church and Hannibal Carter, opened up billiard halls and taverns to cater to black soldiers and the city’s black migrant population. In these establishments, former slaves could share news about family members, the progress of the war and reconstruction, and exchange ideas about their expectations for freedom. These social gatherings were also rooted in the cultural heritage of the antebellum past. In the southern interior slaves often came together for song and dance during harvest festivals, holidays, and funeral gatherings. For African Americans these social gatherings provided a refuge from the daily requirements of cotton production and provided social spaces to build community. And, former slaves drew upon this heritage in Memphis, helping them strengthen social ties in their new communities and firmly root their leisure activities within the cultural traditions of their past. These black establishments were important places for entertainment and camaraderie where freed people not only drank, danced, and gambled, but formed new bonds of fellowship outside the gaze of white supervision.

These social gatherings remained subject to constraints, however. Throughout the American South, slave codes and informal plantation rules prohibited slave gatherings and governed slaves’ behavior. Similarly, in Memphis, city ordinances during the Civil War still did not allow slaves to gather in the streets, drink, gamble, or
engage in unlawful assemblies. And, free blacks were not allowed to hold “negro balls or parties” without permits from the mayor and sanction from the police committee.\textsuperscript{112} By coming together in these establishments former slaves were able to create new identities as free people and resist their former subservient status. The music and dance exhibited during these post-slavery gatherings also helped nurture what Tera Hunter refers to as a “distinctive, transgressive, cultural form” where white norms were critiqued and challenged.\textsuperscript{113} But, white Southerners and military authorities perceived these social gatherings as a threat to the social order and looked for ways to prevent African Americans from gathering together outside of white supervision.

White residents viewed the nightlife and leisure activities as unacceptable and, increasingly, as an example of migrants’ perceived criminal behavior. African Americans were required to procure a license to hold social gatherings. And, in February of 1866, the Freedmen’s Bureau ordered that “all persons engaged in keeping dance houses are notified that unless such license is procured within five days from this date, said houses will be closed and the proprietors of the house fined or imprisoned or both according to the nature of the offence.”\textsuperscript{114} And, local residents and military authorities repeatedly expressed alarm at the site of former slaves drinking and gambling. These concerns included men and women. General David Tillson complained about the “large number of females who pool about the streets at night making their living by their abandoned habits.”\textsuperscript{115} By implying black women engaged in prostitution, General Tillson’s remarks suggest that not only did white Northerners
share white Southerners’ views about African American women’s supposed licentious behavior, but the tendency of freed men and women to gather together freely in public and earn a living outside acceptable standards of capitalist production were a threat to the social order. Thus, while the new migrant population consistently strived to reconstitute familiar social relations, local authorities expressed a need for constant supervision and control.

As a consequence, these social gatherings were a site for frequent disturbances and physical confrontations. In the months following the Civil War, the local police repeatedly attempted to breakup social gatherings organized by the black community. Their efforts were often prevented by black soldiers who designated themselves as the protector of migrant communities. For example, in September of 1865, the local police were unable to disband a large gathering of African Americans after midnight. The Memphis Daily Argus reported that they were prevented “from so doing by a number of negro soldiers, who were present.” These confrontations led the Argus to complain that black soldiers often attended these balls and dances and “stationed themselves at the doors of these places to prevent the police from interfering with any disturbance of any kind.”

Despite attempts by military authorities to prevent black soldiers from attending these events and prohibit these social gatherings altogether, African Americans continued to resist any attempt to prevent them from holding this nighttime gatherings. It was not uncommon for African Americans to be arrested for holding “negro balls” without a permit. And, confrontations continued as well. In February of 1866, when two policemen attempted “to arrest some two or three of the
“ladies” at a social gathering their husbands and brothers interfered and prevented the arrest. The policemen were forced to leave. Reportedly, they returned later that evening with additional armed policemen and threatened to “shoot the damned negroes.” While no shooting occurred, the incident highlights just how determined former slaves were to gather together free from white supervision. By March of 1866, Brigadier General Benjamin P. Runkle observed that most of the dance and gambling houses had been “suppressed;” however, the nightlife continued to be a key component of black community life in Memphis and played a crucial role in opening up social spaces where black men and women gathered together and asserted their right to free, unencumbered access to the public sphere.

The intra-regional wartime migrations forever changed the social and physical landscape of the Mid-South. When Louis Hughes made his fifth attempt to escape from bondage the relationship between slaves and masters had been transformed. Hughes attempted twice before during the Civil War to escape only to be captured by Confederate soldiers and returned to his owners. He noted, since the war, his former owners held him with “a tighter rein than ever” before. And they responded to his every move with a sense of desperation, fearful that if Hughes and others came together “freely they might plan ways of escape, and communicate to each other what they knew about the war and the Yankees.” At last, Hughes with the help of others was able to plan a successful escape. But, as Hughes made his journey through northern Mississippi to Memphis, Tennessee, the southern landscape he encountered
had been radically altered. Many of the slaves in the region had long since abandoned their former owners. And, throughout the southern interior, Hughes wrote, “most of the bridges had been burned, by the troops, and there were no regular railroad trains.” Hughes’ observations about these changes continued once he reached Memphis. The city, Hughes noted, he “could scarcely recognize” and as he traveled to his former owner’s plantation just outside Memphis he concluded “all was changed.” Nothing was perhaps more symbolic of the changes that accompanied the Civil War than the thousands of other ex-slaves, Hughes wrote, who “in search of freedom of which they had so long dreamed, flocked into the city of refuge, and walked hundreds of miles.”

Hughes’ journey to freedom, and that of countless other enslaved people, demonstrated the fissures of property rights in men, women, and children that order southern public life.

Yet, the breakdown of the social order did not guarantee former slaves a place in their new surroundings, but rather transformed their individual and cooperative endeavors from a contest between masters and slaves into a threat to the entire community. These tensions over race and autonomy invariably led to physical confrontations. Violence between former slaves, local authorities, and white residents were quite common and, on May 1, 1866, a physical altercation between the city’s police force and a group of recently discharged African American soldiers escalated into three days of rioting by white Memphians. African Americans were beaten, robbed, raped, and murdered. A Joint Congressional Committee sent to investigate the massacre concluded that forty-six African Americans were killed and five African
American women were reportedly raped. Not surprisingly many of the victims of the violence were members of the “new” migrant communities of former slaves in Memphis. In addition, the mob targeted symbols of race progress and the community infrastructure built during and immediately after the Civil War. The Committee concluded that ninety-one homes, four churches, and twelve schools built for the city’s new black population were destroyed.\textsuperscript{120} “The violence of the riot, and the social tensions that underlay it,” one historian writes, “ultimately derived from the wartime migration of thousands of black men and women.”\textsuperscript{121} Similar to other southern cities, violence emerged as an expedient recourse to limit the freedoms and social interactions of former slaves and order public life around the dictates of white supremacy. In the wake of the violence numerous black men and women fled the city, while those who stayed were forced to rebuild. The Memphis Massacre revealed just how tenuous African Americans place in public life was after slavery and would remain throughout the late nineteenth century. The massacre provides a great deal of information on race relations in the urban South, and as the next chapter will show, it provides even more insight into how former slaves attempted to reconstruct community and place in the post-slavery era.

\begin{footnotes}
\begin{enumerate}
\item Hughes, \textit{Thirty Years a Slave}, 18, 19, 20, 21, 22.
\item Ibid., 43, 81.
\end{enumerate}
\end{footnotes}


Benjamin Bedford Papers, Southern Historical Collection, the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill.

Hughes, *Thirty Years a Slave: From Bondage to Freedom*, 32.


Lamon, Blacks in Tennessee, 6.

Lamon, Blacks in Tennessee, 9.


Lamon, Blacks in Tennessee, 9.


Lamon, Blacks in Tennessee, 9.

*Abstract of the Returns of the Fifth Census, Showing the Number of Free People, the Number of Slaves, the Federal or Representative Number, and the Aggregate of Each County of Each State of the United States* (Washington: Duff Green, 1832) and the Population Schedules of the 8th Federal Census.


Quoted in Charles Sackett Sydnor, *Slavery in Mississippi* (Gloucester, Massachusetts: P. Smith, 1965), 81.


Carriere, “Blacks in Pre-Civil War Memphis.”

For a complete list of city regulations and ordinances that applied to slaves and free blacks see *The Digest of the Charters and Ordinances, from 1826 to 1860*, Memphis and Shelby County Public Library. For a good discussion on the development and enforcement of these local ordinances see Carriere, “Blacks in Pre-Civil War Memphis.” For a discussion of African American religious

26 Marius Carriere, Jr., in his discussion of African Americans in antebellum Memphis argues that during the 1840s and 1850s the “moderate attitude toward blacks, that some historians claim characterized early Memphis, disappears and regulations and complaints become increasingly common.” Carriere uses these examples to demonstrate that even though the management of slaves and free blacks continued to be a problem for whites prior to the Civil War slavery was not incompatible with urban life. See Carriere, “Blacks in Pre-Civil War Memphis.” Though not the subject of this chapter, these examples also demonstrate that slaves and free blacks continued to resist white domination and looked for ways to find some semblance of autonomy away from white supervision.


29 Hughes, *Thirty Years a Slave*, 88.

30 Henry Washington Walter Papers, Southern Historical Collection, University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill and John Houston Bills Diaries, Tennessee State Library and Archives.

31 In Leslie Schwalm’s examination of the patterns of wartime migration from the Mississippi River Valley to the Upper Midwest she identifies three “distinct paths.” The first was slave flight, the second was relocation organized by white solders, and the third was the relocation of fugitive slaves to Northern employers. See Schwalm, “‘Overrun with Free Negroes’: Emancipation and Wartime Migration in the Upper Midwest.”

32 For example, the black population of Atlanta rose from around 1,900 to 10,000 between 1860 and 1870. Tera W. Hunter, *To ‘Joy My Freedom: Southern Black Women’s Lives and Labors After the Civil War* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1997), 21.


34 A census order by the city council concluded that there were 10,995 African Americans in Memphis out of a total population of 27,703. See Job Bledsoe, Censuses of Memphis, 1865. However, a census taken by the Freedmen’s Bureau concluded that in Memphis and on President’s Island the total black population numbered 16,509. See, Freedmen’s Bureau Census, Records of the Memphis Sub-District, Reel 1, Memphis and Shelby County Public Library (hereafter cited RMDS).

35 Hughes, *Thirty Years a Slave*, 176.

36 Memphis *Daily Avalanche*, June 15, 1862.


38 Memphis *Daily Appeal*, April 17, 1863.

39 Population Schedules of the Ninth Census, 1870, City of Memphis, Wards 1-10.

40 Hughes, *Thirty Years a Slave*, 20, 72-74.

41 The Freedmen’s Saving and Trust Company was established in Memphis in 1865 and accepted deposits from African Americans until it went bankrupt in 1874. There are over 6,000 deposit ledgers for this period and many of them contain biographical information on the black community that emerged during the Civil War and its immediate aftermath. See the Registers of Signatures of Depositors in Branches of the Freedman’s Saving and Trust Company, 1865-1874, Memphis, Tennessee, National Archives, RG 101.


43 Francis Terry Lake Papers, Southern Historical Collection, the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill.


45 Rawick, *An American Slave*, vol. 8, 131-133.

46 “Slave flight,” John Hope Franklin and Loren Schweninger observe, show “how a significant number of slaves challenged the system and how the great majority of them struggled to attain their freedom even if they failed.” And, for many African Americans, cities provided a pathway to freedom. John Hope Franklin and Loren Schweninger, *Runaway Slaves: Rebels on the Plantation* (New York and Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1999), xiv.

47 Hughes, *Thirty Years a Slave*, 65-70, 80-82.


49 Rawick, *Thirty Years a Slave*, 139.


51 Rawick, *An American Slave*.


53 Rawick, *An American Slave*. For many slaves “turning down the pot” was a shared cultural tradition designed to ensure secrecy. The origin of this tradition is unclear, but as Michael Gomez argues, these secret rituals were evidence of resistance and the shared cultural identity of African Americans. References to this tradition are common in slave narratives. See Michael Gomez, *Exchanging Our Country Marks: The Transformation of African Identities in the Colonial and Antebellum South* (Chapel Hill: the University of North Carolina Press, 1998), 200.

54 Rawick, *An American Slave*, vol. 8, 8-10.


56 Rawick, *An American Slave*.


58 Rawick, *An American Slave*.


60 John Houston Bills Diaries, Tennessee State Library and Archives.

61 In Armstead L. Robinson’s detailed study of slavery and the Confederacy he concluded that the unwillingness of southern landowners to abandon their slaves and participate in the war contributed to the demise of slavery and the defeat of the Confederacy. See Armstead L. Robinson, *Bitter Fruits of Bondage: The Demise of Slavery and the Collapse of the Confederacy, 1861-1865* (Charlottesville: University of Virginia Press, 2005).

62 Benjamin Bedford Letters, Southern Historical Collection, the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill.

63 Hughes, *Thirty Years a Slave*, 160, 161.


65 Rawick, *An American Slave*, vol. 9, 73-76.

66 Nimrod Pointer Journals, Tennessee State Library and Archives.

67 John Houston Bills Diaries, Tennessee State Library and Archives.

68 Rawick, *An American Slave*, vol. 10, 143-144.


For a good discussion on black soldiers in Memphis see Hardwick, “‘Your Old Father Abe Lincoln is Dead and Damned.’”

For an examination of emancipation as it relates to gender see Leslie A. Schwalm, A Hard Fight for We: Women’s Transition from Slavery to Freedom in South Carolina (Urban: University of Illinois Press, 1997).

The census taken by the Freedmen’s Bureau concluded that 10,154 African American women were in and around Memphis out of a total population of 16,509. See Freedmen’s Bureau Census, RMSD, Reel 1, Memphis and Shelby County Library.

Ibid., June 15, 1862. Arrests of runaway slaves were frequent in the months after federal occupation. See, for example, Daily Avalanche, June 8, 1862; June 9, 1862; June 10, 1862; June 11, 1862; June 13, 1862; Daily Appeal, July 11, 1862; August 8, 1862.

The debate on the origins of emancipation is extension. My study on the wartime migrations of slaves in the Mid-South affirms the conclusions made by Ira Berlin and others that only after enslaved people began to abandon their owners during the war did federal authorities begin to consider an emancipation policy. See Ira Berlin and others, eds., The Destruction of Slavery, Freedom, A Documentary History on Emancipation (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1985); Ira Berlin and others, eds., Slaves No More: Three Essays on Emancipation and the Civil War, Freedom, A Documentary History on Emancipation (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1992); Robinson, Bitter Fruits of Bondage.

Daily Avalanche, June 9, 1862; June 13, 1862. For a discussion of the military’s policy towards former slaves in Memphis also see Hardwick, “‘Your Old Father Abe Lincoln is Dead and Damned,’” 111.

Daily Avalanche, August 19, 1862.

Ibid., October 30, 1863. The confrontations the ensued during the Civil War era were indicative of the clash of expectations that occurred between former slaves and white Southerners throughout the region and what Tera W. Hunter refers to as a contest between “domination and resistance.” See Hunter, To ‘Joy My Freedom.


Memphis Daily Argus, September 26, 1865, 3.

Daily Argus, May 25, 1865, 3.

Daily Argus, September 26, 1865, 3.

See Daily Appeal, Daily Avalanche, and Daily Post.

Appeal, August 8, 1862.

Memphis Recorder’s Court, Shelby County Archives.

Daily Argus, May 25, 1865, 3.

September 29, 1865, RMSD, Reel 1, Memphis and Shelby County Public Library.

General David Tillson, August 18, 1865, RMSD, Reel 1, Memphis and Shelby County Public Library.
For an account of the importance of marital unions among ex-slaves in Memphis see *Families and Freedom: A Documentary History of African American Kinship in the Civil War Era*, ed. Ira Berlin and Leslie S. Rowland (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1997). Beverly G. Bond notes, however, that many of these marriages may have been made because military officials limited support to only those enlisted men and women who were married. See Bond, “Every Duty Incumbent Upon Them,” 210. Indeed, in Memphis, federal authorities repeatedly expressed concern that African Americans were not legally legitimizing their marriages. Most likely, many former slaves felt little need to legitimize relationships already accepted by their family and community nor did they necessarily feel the need to embrace such legal standards.

Report of the Memphis Sub-District for the Month of August, September 10, 1866, BRFAL, Reel 17.

*The Digest of the Charters and Ordinances, from 1826 to 1860*, Memphis and Shelby County Public Library.


Circular Order, February 1866, BRFAL, Reel 8.

General David Tillson, September 10, 1865, RMSD, Reel 1, Memphis and Shelby County Public Library.

*Daily Argus*, September 26, 1865, 3.

Affidavit of Robert R. Church and others, February 17, 1866, RMSD, Reel 22, Memphis and Shelby County Public Library.

General Benjamin Runkle, Monthly Report for March from the Sub-District of Memphis, BRFAL, Reel 17.

Hughes, *Thirty Years a Slave*, 126-137.

See *Memphis Riots and Massacres*.

Hardwick, “‘Your Old Father Abe Lincoln is Dead and Damned,’” 111.
Chapter 3: (Re) Imagining Place

On Tuesday, May 1, 1866, a physical altercation between a group of recently discharged African American soldiers and the Memphis city police force escalated into three days of violence in South Memphis. What is commonly referred to as the “Memphis Riot” was in actuality a massacre that resulted in the death of forty-six African American men and women, the destruction of ninety-one homes, four churches, and twelve schools all built for the city’s new black migrant community of former slaves, along with the reported rape of five black women and countless robberies and beatings of innocent civilians. Similar to the New Orleans Riot later that year, the massacre received national attention and helped convince many northern Republicans that the South had learned few lessons from the Civil War and that a more stringent Reconstruction plan was needed to protect African American civil rights. Unlike the New Orleans Riot, however, the Memphis Massacre took place over several days and targeted the entire black migrant community in South Memphis providing insight into former slaves’ struggle to lay down social and cultural roots in an urban environment. Yet, five months after the violence subsided members of the African Methodist Episcopal Avery Chapel published an appeal in the Memphis Daily Post, a republican newspaper, for financial support to rebuild their church that
revealed not only a desire to hold civil authorities responsible, but demonstrated their permanence in the new social order.

Whereas, property belonging to this association, situated on Gayoso street between DeSoto and Hernando, was give to the flames by the mob during the riot in May last; and whereas, we have received no compensation for the wanton destruction of the same, either from the city of Memphis, or form any other source, except through the charity of private individuals, notwithstanding the many assurances and promises, and more than all the written, published and widely circulated order of General C. B. Fisk affirming that our buildings should be rebuilt; now, therefore, be it resolved, that we most urgently and respectfully appeal to the people of Memphis and to all well wishers of Christianity, and who are willing to encourage and desire the spread of education and enlightenment among the colored people, to stretch forth a helping hand, and by donations of money or building material to enable us to complete the humble structure which we are now striving to raise upon the ashes of our former building.³

In the end, the failure of the federal government and the city of Memphis to provide their congregation with compensation for their losses renewed African Americans’ commitment to reconstituting communities and a sense of belonging to their new surroundings. African Americans rebuilt Avery Chapel, along with the homes, businesses, and social institutions of the post-Civil War black community, by relying on their own collective strategies of self-help and intra-racial cooperation.

Historians have paid considerable attention to the social, political, and economic factors that caused this massacre. Prior to the 1960s, Dunning school historians blamed the violence on the reported unruly behavior of black soldiers and the working classes. And, they minimized the political significance of the event by reducing it to a local disturbance caused by the “natural animosity” between Irish immigrants and former slaves.⁴ “In Memphis,” Claude Bowers wrote in The Tragic Era, “a group of boisterous drunken negro soldiers, recently disbanded, interfered with
the police in the discharge of a legitimate duty, shot an officer, and precipitated an indiscriminate slaughter of the blacks by the rowdy element in the community.” In recent decades, historians have challenged this Dunning school narrative. Scholars such as Bobby L. Lovett and James Ryan have focused on the indiscriminate violence targeted against the black community as an example of racial prejudices among white Southerners and Northerners. Social historians have shown that not only white elites and city officials played a significant role in the massacre, but the “rioters” also included men of “property and standing.” The mob included aspiring middle-class residents of the South Memphis neighborhood who felt most threatened by the social and political changes that accompanied intra-regional migrations. Most recently, Kevin Hardwick and Hannah Rosen examined the massacre to explore how black men’s and women’s visions of freedom were contested in public space. Both demonstrated how African Americans’ use of public space exceeded racial norms, producing a concerted effort by citizens of Memphis to reassert white supremacy. Although the massacre was more than just a response to black assertiveness and economic insecurity, but rather a contest over place and the social and cultural integrity of the South Memphis neighborhood.

During the war, most black migrants settled in the area known as South Memphis. Located on the city’s southern periphery in the Sixth and Seventh Wards, these wards were established to make room for the city’s working-class, immigrant population. Because South Memphis was located away from the city’s river bluffs, Altina Waller observes, it was also environmentally less preferable to the downtown
district. Families and kin of black soldiers, many of them members of Avery Chapel, settled in this muddy terrain to be near the Union Army stationed at Fort Pickering. In addition to protection, black soldiers provided military clothing and supplies to their family and other migrants to help them survive. And, these former slaves with help from the Union Army, the Freedmen’s Bureau, and northern missionaries began changing the physical landscape. Schools, churches, and homes were built to accommodate the new migrant population. Considered “shanty-towns” by military authorities and local residents alike, African Americans considered these make-shift cabins their homes and these “shanty-towns” their communities. More than just the physical environment, former slaves’ efforts to establish permanent roots threatened to change the city’s disposition. In South Memphis, these newcomers struggled to establish autonomous communities away from white supervision in ways similar to their life as slaves. They pooled together resources, scoured their surroundings for food and supplies, and carved out informal spaces for socialization. This behavior was often exaggerated and mischaracterized by local residents as illicit. As a result, South Memphis developed a nefarious reputation as immoral and a threat to the social and economic order. The events surrounding the Memphis Massacre, therefore, provide insight into the ways places were imagined to reinforce white supremacy by local residents and northern officials, as well as the various levels of attachment former slaves displayed in their efforts to reconstruct places to meet their desire for socialization and community.
Migrants expressed desire to have more control over their labor and time was essential to community life. During the war, African American men were paid for their service in the Union Army, while black women worked as cooks or laundresses for the military. Some began opening businesses for the new black migrant community, while others found odd jobs working for white citizens of Memphis. As a result, many began making small purchases and established a level of economic independence. These practices continued after the war. African American men found work as barbers, carpenters, and shoemakers; though most black men worked as unskilled daily laborers. African American women were able to make a daily living by either working as cooks or by washing and ironing. These opportunities remained limited, however, subject to the power and influence of white employers. But, unlike slavery, black men and women had more control over the terms of their labor. They could quit and change jobs to protest low wages, unfair treatment, and longs hours. Their desire for better pay and more time off to spend with their friends and family were designed to rebuild lives separate from the control and supervision of white Southerners.

These expectations frequently led to confrontations with their employers. In Memphis, African American men and women filed over three hundred cases in the Freedmen’s Courts between November of 1866 and May the following year. The majority of complaints were over the employment practices of white Southerners. And, while numerous cases involved agricultural laborers, skilled and unskilled urban workers filed complaints as well. Because many skilled laborers were not paid until
they completed their task, they often used the Freedmen’s Court to secure compensation. There were complaints from carpenters, plasters, and other skilled workers against white Memphians. Jerry Smith, a shoemaker, took Louis Casey to court to receive the $225 he was owed for making shoes for the defendant. Or, in another instance, an African American barber filed a complaint for an $8 unpaid bill for shaving a white patron. The courts mediated disputes filed by unskilled laborers as well. In Memphis, a number of African Americans found employment as hack drivers in the city and, in some instances, they took whites to court for their services. These cases did not only involve black men. African American washerwomen filed complaints for services that remained unpaid, while black women who performed other household tasks such as sewing and cooking used the court to hold white Memphians responsible. Although for most African Americans the Freedmen’s Bureau represented a legal avenue of last resource to assert their rights as laborers.¹⁴

More often, employers and workers negotiated new terms for labor outside the courts. These incidents took place daily and demonstrate how the labor and time of former slaves remained contested. Because white Southerners were unwilling to relinquish their control over former slaves, physical confrontations were common. David Phillips was whipped after he refused to admit to reportedly hurting his employer’s mule. Or, in another instance, Nelson Duskin was stabbed and killed by a white Memphian when he questioned the price for cotton. In response, African Americans criticized white Southerners’ unwillingness to recognize them as free laborers. In April of 1866, a letter from an anonymous black citizen to the Memphis
Daily Post, called upon the paper to help protect them from abuses from their employers. He charged that white employers were placing black Memphians in situations “but a little, if any, better than their former conditions of slavery.”

African Americans also fought back. One night shortly after the war, for example, a black laborer who was helping unload a ship on the river attempted to quit before night time. He became involved in a dispute with his employer, and after he was slapped, he picked up a board and struck his employer in the head. Others decided to opt out of the free wage economy entirely. They looked for odd jobs, sold their wares, and raised their own food to meet their daily needs. Regardless of the tactics used, they provided former slaves with a measure of autonomy over their labor and time, providing them with the necessary social space to reconstitute communities. They now had a say in where and when their work began and ended.

The continued expansion of saloons and dance halls in South Memphis suggest former slaves were able to successfully delineate the boundaries between work and leisure. African Americans frequently congregated for drinking, gambling, and dancing in licensed and unlicensed establishments on South Street. Local residents often observed crowds of African Americans outside the drinking houses and on the street corners of South Memphis. Talking, laughing, and having a “good time,” these gatherings included not just soldiers, but civilian men and women. They presented opportunities to socialize and create a sense of community amongst a disparate population of migrants. They associated not as slaves or refugees, but as men and women looking for independence and camaraderie. Attempts to regulate this behavior
after the war only met modest success. In March of 1866, Freedmen Bureau officials concluded that dance houses and gambling shops had been suppressed, and the city was free of most “black evil doers.”\textsuperscript{18} Despite these efforts, Tony Cherry, a soldier from the Third Colored Heavy Artillery Regiment, observed that African Americans were easily able to acquire alcohol, despite rules against selling to soldiers, and others noted migrants continued to drink and congregate in unlicensed establishments.\textsuperscript{19} Symbolic of black autonomy, the sites and sounds on display in South Memphis reveals how former slaves navigated the physical landscape to accommodate their desire for socialization.

Yet, white residents expressed different impressions of black migrants’ efforts to establish a sense of community. Between 1861 and 1865, the black population of Memphis increased from 3,882 to 16,509 and in the months preceding the massacre white residents and military authorities increasingly stigmatized African American actions as illicit and dangerous to the community.\textsuperscript{20} “The city is literally swarming with these ragged and dirty vagabonds,” the Memphis \textit{Daily Avalanche} reported, “who are seriously looking for the sweets of their freedom.”\textsuperscript{21} Considered vagrants by most, migrants were “a nuisance to a city,” and the Memphis \textit{Public Ledger} charged, the “lowest class” were black.\textsuperscript{22} Their vagrant status symbolized their perceived threat to the social order. Because they remained “idle” and refused to abide by the laws and customs of the local community or find dependable employment they were a threat to the entire social body. White Memphians argued, by remaining “idle” black migrants had a propensity for crime and violence. Less than one year before the infamous
Memphis Massacre was to occur the Memphis *Daily Argus*, a conservative newspaper, predicted “that the old days of riot and bloody melees are about to return to our country and disgrace our city,” and, the paper continued, “it seems as if nothing but blood will wash away the utter hatred and animosity held between freedmen and our citizens.”23 White Memphians’ response to the public behavior of black soldiers and civilians underscored how social fears influenced perceptions of place and became an imagined “reality.”

The presence of armed black soldiers in South Memphis undoubtedly heightened white southerners’ fears and anxiety. African Americans soldiers were viewed as a sign of southern powerlessness under Radical Republican rule and seen as a threat to the security of the city. Local residents frequently criticized their unwillingness to give deference to white men and women. Elizabeth Meriwether, the wife of a prominent slave owner and colonel in the Confederate Army, commented on black soldiers’ behavior. She observed, any “stranger, seeing those negroes would have supposed the Blacks, not the whites, were masters in the South.”24 These soldiers patrolled the streets of South Memphis around Fort Pickering, organized parades and political rallies, and protected black migrants from abuse from local residents and authorities. As a consequence of their assertiveness, they were frequently involved in physical confrontations with white Memphians, raising concerns about social disorder. Not only were “negro garrisons” considered an insult in reminder of southern defeat and occupation, but white residents charged, they escalated the threat of “riots and mobs.” And, white southerners believed their
presence only served to further exacerbate social tensions by encouraging ex-slaves to try and move beyond their station in life. The Memphis Daily Avalanche noted that black soldiers raised African American expectations “above all reason, and discontents them with the plain task of their labor.”

Confrontations between black migrants and soldiers with the police occurred regularly. James Donahue, for example, observed that whenever members of the city’s police force arrested a former slave, “the first thing he did was strike him.” He continued, noting, that while he did not know whether it was right or wrong “it did not seem to me to be right.” Other former slaves criticized the entire white community of Memphis. William Coe, a former slave from Virginia who worked in a black smith shop, claimed that since he arrived in Memphis he was robbed several times and treated poorly by the white citizens of Memphis. Since emancipation, he observed, not only did everyone try to take “advantage” of him, but whites also tried to take advantage “against every colored person.” Because African Americans resisted local authorities the violence often escalated. Gun battles between African American soldiers and city police officers were common. For example, in September 1865, after seven black soldiers attempted to prevent a city police officer from taking an arrested African American to the Station house, the parties exchanged gun fire. In another incident, after law enforcement attempted to arrest an African American accused of robbing a hack driver several black soldiers and “a large crowd of unarmed negroes” surrounded the policemen. The crowd then ordered the police “to clear out, and leave” which they did. Many of these disputes occurred in South Memphis because
city authorities patrolled the area as well and law enforcement responsibilities were unclear. For example, David Roach, an Irish policeman, was involved in a confrontation with a black soldier after he mistakenly concluded that the city police was responsible for arresting deserters and demanding passes from all black soldiers in uniform.\textsuperscript{29} Labeled “negro outrages” by the conservative press, the shootings, fist fights, and arguments that took place regularly symbolized to white Memphians black migrant’s disregard for law and order.

Regardless of intentions or proof, white residents categorized migrant behavior as criminal. Free from the discipline of slavery, white Memphians claimed, migrants “ignorance” and inability to appreciate freedom explained why “so much crime” existed among former slaves.\textsuperscript{30} Most complaints were for petty theft and minor criminal offenses. In January 1865, for example, after a group of black soldiers entered a grocery store a merchant drew out a revolver and opened fire when he caught one individual stealing a small quantity of tobacco.\textsuperscript{31} Such incidents of theft were common and reportedly regularly in the local papers. As a result of this reported behavior, one white observer concluded, African Americans were “inclined to pilfer and steal,” especially when they were in crowds. More often than not this behavior was misunderstood and exaggerated. Instead, displaced by war and lacking the necessary material resources to survive, theft was often a testament to migrants desire to feed and clothe their families. Black soldiers, for instance, complained that because they frequently did not receive regularly pay theft was necessary to support their families.\textsuperscript{32} Most African Americans arrested for theft were accused of stealing wood,
food, or clothing. And since arrest records suggests that crimes committed by African Americans were not disproportionate to the overall population, more than likely the sudden increase in a more assertive black migrant population led local residents to exaggerate criminal activity and accuse African Americans for unsolved and unproven offenses. 33 This tendency was observed by P.D. Beecher, a surgeon from the Freedmen’s Bureau, who stated there were “a great many robberies committed by whites that have been charged to the negroes.” 34

African Americans’ tendency to gather freely in public spaces influenced local residents’ continued penchant to categorize migrant’s social activities as threatening. Because the majority of black migrants settled in the South Memphis neighborhood during the war, not only did this area experience the most substantial population increase, but former slaves radically altered the physical and social landscape. In the process of trying to establish a sense of belonging, former slaves transformed the muddy and unpaved streets of South Memphis to meet their desire for socialization. South Street, in particular, became a place for African Americans to gather. Located on the eastern periphery of the city, traveling north to south the street ended at Fort Pickering on the banks of the Mississippi River. Here, inside and outside the informal drinking houses and dance houses, black soldiers and civilian men and women found time to join with family and friends and newcomers found opportunities to make new acquaintances and reconnect with kin, overcoming the social and physical obstacles that inhibited community and nearness. 35 This activity, however, often challenged white southerners’ and northerners’ social expectations. As a result, South Street and
the surrounding area developed a negative reputation for residents’ violations of moral standards.

No doubt white Memphians considered the areas’ interracial character a violation of social norms. Similar to other southern cities after the war, segregation was not yet enforced, meaning whites and blacks often lived next door to each other and shared the same streets. Local residents rented to black migrants and traded regularly with them in their neighborhood shops and stores. It was also not unusual for whites and blacks to socialize together. In some instances, they congregated in the same drinking houses together. This practice was representative of the working-class subcultures that emerged in urban centers across the nation; however, interracial socialization in public venues became more frequent in southern cities after the war. Some of these relationships also raised questions about residents’ sexual practices. While interracial relationships between white men and black women were not new in the South, public recognition of such relationships were discouraged, and after the war visible displays of these relationships took on additional significance as a threat to social stability. Although individuals rarely made these relationships public they were known to take place in South Memphis. For example, considered a “gentlemen” by a property-owner who rented a store to him on St. Martin, the renter’s character was called into question after he “took a negro woman” to live with him. Not only was he known to be “sleeping with this yellow woman every night,” but he sold liquor to African Americans. Not surprisingly the homes and stores of individuals who traded and socialized with African Americans were targeted by the mob during the massacre.
But, more often, local residents’ impressions of South Memphis were influenced by exaggerated perceptions of black men’s and women’s public demeanor. The drinking houses and stores that sold alcohol to African Americans were popular gathering places. As a result, white Memphians complained about their behavior. Black soldiers were criticized for “getting drunk” frequently and being disorderly. And, while the social practices of black soldiers were targeted by citizens with disdain, these establishments were visited by civilians as well. For many residents the violent confrontations that took place between migrants and the police and their perceived criminal activity resulted from former slaves’ inebriated state. The banter and social play that transpired at these establishments were also criticized and categorized as “vulgar” and “obscene” in violation of middle-class norms of social respectability. These individuals were known to be “shouting, cursing, and blackguarding one another.”

Public spaces were still considered male terrains. Women who violated nineteenth-century social expectations were subject to having their character called into question. In South Memphis, black women frequented dance-houses and mingled with the opposite sex. And, while saloons were visited mostly by men, black women also gathered to drink and socialize. Commenting on the character of South Memphis drinking establishments, one long-time white resident observed, “negroes drink there, both men and women.” Similar to men, black women enjoyed the opportunities drinking provided for socialization with other women and men. But, they were also subject to scrutiny and harassment by the police and arrest records suggest gender
expectations played a role in how their behavior was perceived. Next to theft, women were commonly arrested for minor misdemeanors such as disorderly conduct or causing a nuisance suggesting they were targeted for simply being in public. Men, on the other hand, were arrested more frequently for fighting and being drunk, characteristics more commonly applied to men’s public behavior. Black women, however, faced the additional burden of being subject to sexual innuendos and accusations. Not only did white southerners typically view African American women as licentious and immoral, but mingling freely with men in public undoubtedly led individuals to question their respectability. And, while arrest records are unclear, the number of women arrested for lewdness and disorderly conduct suggests they may have been targeted for violating sexual standards of good behavior.  

Even more disconcerting to white Memphians, the lack of businesses that served African Americans and modern conveniences meant these activities often took place in full public view. Whites complained about the habit of black soldiers and civilians gathering in large numbers on the street corners of South Memphis. This practice undoubtedly increased as temperatures rose and indoor spaces became suffocating. And, as others historians have noted, the rising number of African Americans in urban areas congregating in public subjected former slaves’ social activities to criticism and increased scrutiny. These concerns were reflected in the ways individuals characterized migrant behavior. African Americans were accused of being “noisy” and “talking on the corners pretty loud.” More troublesome to local residents, black soldiers were accused of being in “the habit of taking most of the
sidewalk” and pushing white Memphians off into the street.43 Seemingly minor on the surface, these confrontations between former slaves and white southerners had political implications. Not only was this a violation of racial etiquette that required African Americans to defer the sidewalks to white men and women, but in a nineteenth-century American city this behavior was undoubtedly considered subversive. Memphis had still yet to develop a modern sewage system and in South Memphis where the streets were unpaved and shared with horses, mules, and other livestock pushing someone into the street was more than “rude,” but an open act of defiance. As a result, arrests for sidewalk obstruction were quite common. In addition to this behavior, white Memphians complained about the habit of black soldiers “firing into the air” making the area appear all the more dangerous.44

White Memphians categorized more than just black migrants’ leisure activities in South Memphis as immoral. They also criticized freed people’s private lives. Scholars have frequently noted one of the first responses of ex-slaves to emancipation was to migrate in search of family members and reconstitute familial social relationships.45 Many spouses separated during slavery reunited in urban areas where they sought to validate their unions legally. And, in Memphis, military officials observed, that “free and married, they will maintain marital relations as sacredly as any other race.”46 But, many of these marriages were made because military officials restricted access to enlisted men to women who were legally married.47 Federal officials still complained about the large number of former slaves living together in crowded conditions, violating white middle-class assumptions that households should
be ordered around nuclear family units. More importantly, military officials shared traditional patriarchal assumptions that once black women were married the federal government would no longer need to provide support. As a result, agency officials resorted to using coercive measures. Responding to concerns about “the practice of concubinage” among former slaves, the bureau issued orders for all freed people living together as “husband and wife” to become legally married. Those freed people who refused to marry, the bureau warned, would be charged with a misdemeanor and “punished by a fine or imprisonment.” 48 There is little evidence to suggest these threats were taken seriously by freed people. Black men and women continued to live together as husband and wife without legally marrying. This did not mean that they did not take their relationships seriously. Instead, they lived together according to the customs of their life during slavery and their marriages were accepted by community standards. 49 But, for white Memphians and military authorities these living arrangements suggested migrants’ sexual deviance and lack of social restraint.

To local residents and federal officials the social habits of migrants had public consequences. The lack of food, clothing, and adequate housing meant that many black migrants were forced to struggle to survive. They pooled their resources together, often living in close proximity to one another and shared their small cabins with friends and family. White Memphians discounted these cooperative strategies. The Memphis Daily Avalanche concluded that conditions for African Americans were “worse off than it was before” they gained their freedom, serving to further validate southern conservatives’ contention that black people were unable to take care of
themselves.\textsuperscript{50} An 1865 federal census indicated the extent of their poverty by concluding that only 3 percent of African Americans were worth more than $100.\textsuperscript{51} Instead, residents and federal officials expressed a common nineteenth century belief that poverty and “crowded conditions” contributed to the potential for “idleness and vice” and the spread of disease among former slaves.\textsuperscript{52} Throughout the months following the Civil War, small pox and cholera epidemics spread among the freed black population. Officials blamed black migrant behavior for the conditions. The Freedmen Bureau concluded the “numerous and sudden deaths” were a result of poor sanitary conditions. To combat the problem of disease all the homes in and around Fort Pickering were ordered to be inspected, especially the “huts occupied by blacks.” They were to be cleaned to prevent the spread of disease and everyone living in these homes was required to give “an account of their means of support,” and by implication those without employment were considered “vagrants” to be removed to the countryside.\textsuperscript{53}

These diseases were not new. But, while residents were familiar with small pox and cholera, they took on added significance after the war. Southerners argued the devastating health problems former slaves faced resulted from emancipation. They did not have these problems as slaves on southern plantations. Instead, white southerners contended because slaves were fed, clothed, and well-cared for they were protected from starvation and the health concerns commonly associated with urban life. More importantly, to local residents these diseases also symbolized the transformation of the social order and black migrants’ threat to the entire white
Commenting on the racial climate in Memphis, B. F. C. Brooks, the editor and publisher of the Republican paper, observed that residents were encouraged to place “the sign of ‘small-pox’” over the doors of the homes and businesses of people who sympathized with the Union and Radical Republicans. By leaving the “small-pox” mark on their doors, residents denoted their outsider status. Because white Republicans were accused of socializing with freed people, these practices also equated racial equality as pathology. And in a climate where the spread of disease was a real concern, southerners indicated that by associating with former slaves these individuals threatened to contaminate the entire social body.

During the immediate post-Civil War era, local residents and federal authorities stigmatized African Americans’ efforts to assert their autonomy and claim control over their daily lives in South Memphis as subversive, criminal, and dangerous. By refusing to obey their employers and return to work on southern plantations, migrants disrupted the social order and threatened the economic livelihood of the entire community. Their behavior often violated the sanctity of private property in an urban environment. While stealing food and supplies to compensate for a lack of material resources may have been a tolerated social practice in the countryside, in a commercial economy these tactics were considered a criminal violation of property rights. More importantly, former slaves’ efforts to take control over their public and private lives in an attempt to carve out a measure of social space and recreate a sense of community were interpreted by white Southerners and Northerners alike as proof that former slaves were ill prepared for freedom and urban life. As a result of these
concerns, responses to black migrants were part of a larger debate about where these former slaves belonged.

Elite white Memphians believed the problems in South Memphis were a product of outsiders. Residents made a distinction between migrant behavior and that of the city’s antebellum black population. When asked to comment about the relationship between whites and antebellum blacks, J. M. Keller, a surgeon for the Confederacy and former slave owner, observed “resident negroes” were generally well treated and the interaction between antebellum blacks and whites were cordial. “When I left this place I believe I left thirty-three negroes,” Keller noted, and “since I came back they have borne the same relationship they formerly did, and I believe that is true in respect to all faithful negroes.” The only difficulty he experienced was with one “rascally boy” who had “been gambling and drinking all his life” inducing the soldiers to be “impudent to me sometimes.”

Others shared similar impressions. Treadwell S. Ayer, a lawyer and former slave owner as well, claimed the relationship between former slave owners and their slaves remained friendly and kind. The bonds between antebellum white and black residents were considered paternalistic by nature. Treadwell expressed his belief that his slaves regarded him as “their best friend” coming to him for “advice.” He believed this cordial relationship remained intact after the war. Instead, the disturbances that occurred in Memphis were the result of “the colored people who do not belong to the town, and did not heretofore.”

In an effort to restore social order, the solutions offered by antebellum whites revealed their understanding that newcomers were to blame for the problems coming
from South Memphis. In December 1865, rumors spread about the potential for a black “insurrection.” They were reacting to news that black soldiers were planning a “revolt” on Christmas Day. Black soldiers’ assertive behavior and violent confrontations with police officers and local residents only served to further validate these concerns. Because elite Memphians were convinced that armed freed men were dangerous to society speculation circulated in Memphis. In January of 1866, for example, a group of antebellum property-holders issued an appeal for the removal of black troops. Instead, they favored taking guns away from African American soldiers and placing them in the hands of white troops.58 Rumors continued to spread. In April of that same year, the Memphis Daily Avalanche reported an account of black soldiers secretly discussing a plan to rise up and fight the “rebels” again.59 Even if these conversations occurred, they more than likely represented black soldiers’ sense of empowerment that accompanied their service in the Union Army and their frustration with white Southerners unwillingness to treat them fairly, more so than any serious attempt to organize a rebellion. For white southerners, on the other hand, these conversations served as a reminder of black autonomy and assertiveness that they attributed to northern occupation and the presence of armed black outsiders.

Efforts to minimize the potential for social disorder reinforced the areas’ reputation as a threat to the entire community. To deal with the problems associated with newcomers in South Memphis, authorities demanded more stringent enforcement of the law. White residents demanded the police force be made “more available.” And undoubtedly fear of the potential for a “black insurrection,” led editors for the
Memphis *Daily Argus* to advocate the development of a grape-vine of information “so that an alarm could be sent by passing it from one beat to another from South Memphis to Chelsea” in north Memphis. Regardless, white Memphians believed the city did not have “enough police.” As a result of these concerns, an additional twenty police officers were put on patrol in the area to help restore order in the neighborhood.

Often, these measures meant tighter controls were placed upon the entire black population in Memphis. Long-term black residents criticized the more aggressive law enforcement tactics. The Freedmen’s Bureau was especially the subject of criticism in the black community. During a meeting with the Freedmen’s Bureau in the Spring of 1866, several “prominent colored men” asserted that “they had no confidence in the bureau whatsoever,” and charged “they had received no protection from the Bureau, that their people had been shot, stabbed, knocked down and otherwise outraged and they could get no redress.” It is not clear if these concerns represented a sense of racial solidarity and a desire to defend the migrant population. What they may have been objecting to was the inability of authorities to recognize social distinctions within the black community and their privileged status as “resident negroes.” Regardless, this debate suggests authorities were stepping up their efforts to control and restrain the behavior of black soldiers and civilians.

Ultimately, the nefarious reputation of South Memphis as a dangerous place led authorities to advocate the removal of migrants all together. As scholars have shown, northern officials often assisted local law enforcement authorities with the
freed population. It helped locate family members, provided schools for freed people, and offered material support to black men and women looking to establish new lives as free people. In Memphis, for example, several thousand former slaves found food, clothing, and shelter in the contraband camps established in the city during the war. But, federal officials shared white southerners’ belief that former slaves needed constant supervision. Under northern occupation, for example, individuals “found loitering habitually about saloons, gaming houses or the streets, and without apparent modes of obtaining an honest livelihood” were to be arrested. And, after the war, the primary goal of local and state officials was to remove African Americans from relief roles and encourage them to be self-sufficient by returning to work on southern plantations. On August 1, 1865, in a report submitted by General Davis Tillson, Memphis superintendent, to General Clinton B. Fisk, Assistant Commissioner, he noted his determination to “reduce our Freedmen’s Camps and Refuge women to the lowest number,” and efforts to quickly make them “self-supporting” and accept only the “helpless and infirm.”

Throughout the state of Tennessee, agency officials were constantly reducing the number of former slaves on ration lists and providing transportation and assistance to free people wishing to return to work in rural areas. The aim of the bureau, General Tillson later observed, was to “discontinue all relief establishments as soon as possible.” These measures were not only in response to the need for labor on southern plantations, but also fueled by perceptions that violence, crime, and disease resulted from black migration to urban areas.
By 1866, black migrants had radically transformed the environment of South Memphis. In the months leading up to the Memphis Massacre racial tensions in the city escalated. Not only did former slaves from the Mississippi Valley continue to migrate to the city, but, on April 30 1866, the last remaining soldiers in Memphis were disbanded and remained in the city waiting for their pay.\textsuperscript{66} Occurring in the middle of spring, the temperate weather undoubtedly meant the widows and doorways were open and individuals were gathering outdoors making their activities more visible. African Americans’ increased presence on the streets of South Memphis undoubtedly reinforced images of the neighborhood as an unsafe area. No doubt long-term residents of the neighborhood who witnessed the changes daily were most alarmed by these developments. As a result, historians have shown, most of the violence that took place targeted migrants around South Street in the sixth and seventh wards. But, the violence was about more than just racism and economic security, it was about restoring the reputation of South Memphis to accepted social standards of morality. Members of the mob destroyed property and robbed individuals and they brutally beat, raped, and murdered innocent civilians, all in an attempt to defend the social and cultural integrity of a neighborhood.

The immediate cause of events that led to the massacre was a physical confrontation between Memphis policemen and African Americans soldiers in South Memphis. On Monday, April 30, 1866, some black soldiers got into a dispute with a few policemen, leading to a physical altercation. This initial confrontation paled in
comparison to what followed, however. On Tuesday afternoon a large number of African American soldiers gathered on the streets of South Memphis. These soldiers had been mustered out and were waiting for their pay. Tony Cherry, a private in the Third United States Colored Heavy Artillery, testified that many of the soldiers had been drinking heavily when they got into an argument with the city police. While it is not certain who fired first, the most accepted explanation is that some soldiers fired in the air, leading the police to return fire. This confrontation concluded with the death of one police officer, but it did not end there. The police returned with reinforcements and began firing indiscriminately at African Americans in the area with many soldiers returning fire. The soldiers then returned to Fort Pickering where they were forcibly disarmed and the majority remained for the duration to watch the events that unfolded in the black community. Later that evening the police returned with a posse of white citizens who began terrorizing black migrants in the area. What followed was a well-organized and planned attack on the homes, property, and lives of the black migrant community in South Memphis. The massacre continued until Major General Stoneman declared martial law on Thursday, May 3, and was able to restore order in the city of Memphis.67

The massacre was subject to a thorough investigation. General Stoneman and General Fisk instituted their own independent commissions to identify the cause of the massacre and those responsible. Meanwhile, Congress was already involved in a contentious debate over extending the life of the Freedmen’s Bureau’s and passage of a Civil Rights Bill. For Radical Republicans the “race riot” in Memphis demonstrated
that freed people’s rights in the South were not being protected. Pennsylvania Congressman Thaddeus Stevens made a motion “to inquire into the origin, progress, and termination of the riotous proceedings.” And, on May 22, 1866, a congressional committee arrived in Memphis and over its two week stay examined one hundred and seventy witnesses. In its final report, the committee identified the role of the conservative press, the behavior of black soldiers and Irish policemen, and the general feeling of white citizens toward the Union as the primary factors contributing to the degree of racial violence in Memphis. Each of these findings has been the subject of detailed studies by historians. Little attention, however, has been given to the testimonies and responses of African Americans to events surrounding the Memphis Massacre. In addition to the testimony African Americans provided to the congressional committee, former slaves also provided testimony for Major General Stoneman’s military commission and filed affidavits with the Freedmen’s Bureau. As a result, the committee’s report was based on the public testimony and affidavits of two hundred and seventy-six black men and women, the majority of whom were former slaves. Contrary to the impressions of local residents, they shared a different image of South Memphis that revealed their struggle to create a feeling of community and lay down permanent roots in their new surroundings.

Many of these testimonies provide information about former slaves’ material belongings. Historians have shown that property ownership was not uncommon among slaves. Some former slaves brought these belongings with them to Memphis, while others were able to accumulate capital during and immediately after the Civil
War. Most of this was either stolen or destroyed during the massacre, but because African Americans made an account of their losses to the local Provost Marshal and filed affidavits with the Freedmen’s Bureau there exists a historical record of their material possessions. Out of one hundred and fifty one African American men and women who claimed financial losses during the massacre eighty-one estimated that the total amount of their belongings was worth $100 or more. These claims led the congressional committee sent to investigate the massacre to conclude that the total amount of individual property lost, the majority belonging to former slaves, was as high as $110,000.71 These material possessions represented more than just the accumulation of wealth, rather these items symbolized autonomy and the economic independence needed to secure new lives for themselves and their families and suggest how successful these newcomers were in their efforts to reconstitute a sense of community in South Memphis.

African Americans responded to their attackers by demonstrating the social importance they placed upon their possessions. A number of African Americans had some amount of cash on hand. Because African American soldiers were recently released from the Army, many black soldiers had just received their discharge pay. This made black soldiers and their families a target for robbery in Memphis. The Daily Post, for example, reported in February of 1866, thieves were targeting black soldiers and robbing them of their earnings.72 And, during the massacre, members of the mob frequently entered suspected homes of black soldiers and their relatives on the pretext of searching for guns and stole their discharge pay in the process. Those
African Americans with large sums of cash on hand were accused of being a Union soldier. Amounts ranged from $50 to $200 and $300. Other former slaves had money saved from working various jobs after emancipation. Lucy Hunt, for example, saved over $300 by working as a cook for the Union Army. During the massacre, members of the mob broke into her trunk and stole her entire savings. Many like Albert Harris, a shoemaker, protested stating, “Don’t carry my money away; it is all I have got.” The wife of Primus Lane was struck in the head after she refused to hand over her money, saying, “Gentlemen, do not take what little money I have.” Most acquiesced to their attackers’ demands to protect their lives and their families.

The property destroyed during the massacre suggests many of these migrants were beginning to lay down permanent roots in their new surroundings. For instance, Andrew Minter served for two years in the navy and left with approximately $500 to begin his life anew. He arrived in Memphis in 1865 and built a “good frame house with two rooms.” In his testimony, he estimated the value of his house and property destroyed during the massacre at $1,000. Others provided a more detailed list of their belongings. Mary Black, the wife of a black soldier, testified that her attackers burnt “everything” except one of her feather beds. This included a “right smart of furniture” and the house, which she asserted, “was mine.” In addition, during the fire, she lost a barrel of flour, a barrel of meal, and a keg of meat. In the case of Hannah Savage, a former slave and wife of a blacksmith, she stated, members of the mob stole “my pillow slips, pillows, and blankets from my bed, five skirts, my linen and clothes, and $120 from my bureau drawer.” Freed people such as Primus Lane
also lost livestock. When asked to account for his losses, Lane testified to the following:

I lost all I had, and I had a good deal for me to lose. I had a couple of hogs that weighed 200, that they burned up; they burned about twenty chickens and the little stuff that was in the cabin. I had a right smart of garden stuff there too, and all that was destroyed.79

While former slaves often lived in overcrowded conditions, the testimony they provided suggest many of the “shanty-towns” and black neighborhoods in South Memphis bureau officials considered a symbol of their destitution and a reason to advocate their removal were in fact perceived much differently by their residents. These newcomers were not destitute. And, in response to the massacre, they expressed a desire to see their communities protected.

Responses to the level of violence varied. For some it was an indication of their powerlessness as freed people. Austin Cotton undoubtedly spoke for many ex-slaves when he observed that all he could do was leave it “in the hands of the Lord, and let it go.” To Cotton the massacre revealed that “they [whites] had the upper hand of us, and we could do nothing.”80 Others did what they could to save merely some of their belongings and escape alive. This did not mean, however, that the residents of South Memphis believed their attackers should not be held accountable. When policemen and members of the mob began indiscriminately shooting black residents Lucy Tibbs, a former slave from Jackson, Arkansas, yelled out in public, “Look here; see John Pendergrast shooting down innocent men.”81 And, in the affidavits and public testimony freed people provided to investigators they identified their attackers. Out of the two hundred and seventy-six testimonies recorded sixty-three identified
individuals who participated in the massacre. Others provided indirect evidence, such as badge numbers or known associates, to help investigators locate their assailants.

Why were former slaves so willing to identify those responsible? African Americans connected the violence during the massacre to their collective struggle to claim control over their daily lives as free people in Memphis. Austin Cotton, for example, a twenty-nine year old ex-slave, was walking home from work on Tuesday, May 1, 1866, when a white citizen of Memphis grabbed him and held him down while a policeman beat him over the head with his pistol. Asked by the committee to describe the treatment of African Americans by white citizens of Memphis, Cotton took the opportunity to relate questions of maltreatment to larger questions about equality. Cotton observed that while no one abused him prior to this recent attack it was because he was “humble as a slave almost.” More importantly, if freedom was to be different from slavery then it did not measure up to his expectations. While he had not been personally maltreated in the past, he told the committee “the colored people do not have any rights; if one of them lifts his fingers he will be fined five dollars, when he would not have been if he had been a slave.” Others interpreted the violent attack as a direct attempt to repudiate the promise of emancipation. Hannah Robinson, a seamstress and former slave from the Mississippi Delta who was beaten and robbed, responded in perhaps the only way she could when asked to explain the intentions of her attackers, stating “we thought they were going to return us to slavery again.”

Despite these fears, many shared a belief that the citizens of Memphis, local authorities, and federal officials should hold their attackers responsible for the theft
and destruction of their property, for the murder of their friends and family, and for the annihilation of the inchoate black community.

Many black Memphians not only knew their assailants, but had done business with them in the past. Almost one third of the “rioters” identified lived in the South Memphis area. Thus, in her detailed study of the Memphis Massacre, Waller concludes, the “riot” was “a social conflict within one discreet neighborhood.” This meant many of the victims could identify their attackers. For example, several black victims identified John Callahan, a well known grocery store owner in the neighborhood. Jane Sneed was an ex-slave and married to a former soldier. Members of the mob burned down her house and on the second night of the massacre murdered her daughter. She identified Callahan as one of those responsible for the death of her daughter. Sneed knew Callahan because she “traded with him often” prior to the massacre. Others were involved in previous disputes with their attackers. Adam Lock, a sixty-seven year old plasterer, testified that during the massacre his house was burned down. He identified Callahan as one of the members of the mob. Asked to explain whether or not he had any difficulty with Callahan in the past, Lock explained, that once Callahan struck him in the back of the head after he was forced by the Provost Marshall to pay Lock for work done. Mollie Davis, a former slave who arrived in Memphis during the war, claimed John Egan, a city police officer, helped burn down her house. She concluded, Egan was “mad with me because I had him arrested” for taking money from her “under false pretenses” in the past. Additionally, former slaves testified despite being threatened. After Lucy Tibbs
identified John Pendergrast, a grocery storeowner, as one of the participants involved in the mob, he threatened to kill Tibbs if she continued to make public statements. Tibbs did anyway.88

Since the massacre took place primarily in one neighborhood many of the victims knew one another, offered help when possible, and corroborated each others testimony. Some like Henry Jackson, whose local blacksmith shop was burned down, were well known in the community.89 Frank Williams testified that one of the shooting victims, Joe Lundy, served in the same regiment as him during the Civil War.90 Because former slaves lived in close proximity to one another many learned about the violent course of events from friends, relatives, and neighbors. Many of the residents of South Memphis were members of the First Baptist Colored Church, for example. As a result, Lavina Godell learned about the murder of her husband from a fellow “sister” of the church.91 These social networks undoubtedly contributed to the willingness of some former slaves to risk their lives in attempt to save others from the mob. The mob shot John Marshall, a carpenter and former black soldier, while he was trying to help put out the fire of a local saloon. Marshall survived, but not everyone was as fortunate.92 Several witnesses testified to the death of Rachel Hatcher. Members of the mob shot and killed Hatcher, who was only sixteen years old, while she was trying to help a neighbor rescue personal belongings from his burning house.93 And, while other black residents attempted to help their neighbors, most noted, they simply were trying to save themselves from becoming victims. The
testimonies provided afterwards therefore served as a modest effort to come to the defense of their neighbors and protect the integrity of the new migrant community.

The discriminate violence targeted against black men and women also highlighted the importance of racial solidarity to meet the post-war challenges that accompanied the end of slavery. That most African Americans understood black soldiers to be the primary targets of the mob is not surprising. Many witnessed confrontations between black soldiers and police officers in the past. And, throughout the duration of the massacre, “rioters” forced their way into homes on the pretext of looking for black soldiers and black residents were often victims because they were related to black soldiers or associated with the Union cause. Those attacked, however, understood the massacre in racial terms. When Austin Cotton was asked to explain why he was attacked, he replied, “I suppose they could not get satisfaction from the soldiers, and they came up here and knocked down every colored man they saw.”

Former slaves viewed the massacre as an attempt to run them out of town, and, even though some newcomers were not harmed they did not absolve the “rioters” for their actions. Henry Porter, a barber and grocery storeowner, was “saved” by the mob. But this did not prevent Porter from identifying John Pendergrast as the “ringleader” and responsible for the murder of Rachel Hatcher. Some long-term residents also expressed a desire to see those responsible held accountable. For example, William Coe, a resident of the antebellum slave population, escaped harm because he had done work with his attackers in the past. And, while he did not identify specific individuals, he did not offer forgiveness either, noting that since slavery the white community
treated him poorly. \textsuperscript{96} Cynthia Townsend, a long-time resident, was also “saved” because one of the “ring leaders” of the mob, John Pendegrast, came to her aid, stating, “I know you are good old people.” It is important to note that not only did she identify Pendergrast as one of the leaders who “fetched this mob out here,” but she identified others responsible for attacking black residents as well. \textsuperscript{97} Long-term resident black who defended the migrant community were rare, however. Instead, the violence underscored newcomers’ shared history in slavery and freedom and their struggle to create a sense of place and belonging.

By the time Major General George Stoneman declared martial law and dispatched federal troops on May 3, 1866, to restore order in South Memphis the black community was decimated. Major General Stoneman’s reluctance to intervene when the massacre began, one historian noted, “needlessly exposed Memphis’ black community to the naked fury of armed white mobs.” \textsuperscript{98} In the months preceding the Memphis Massacre the majority of United States troops in Memphis were disbanded and most law enforcement responsibilities were placed in the hands of local authorities. Thus, when first informed about the violence on May 1, 1866, Major General Stoneman told local authorities “they were perfectly competent and capable of taking care of themselves.” \textsuperscript{99} Over the next two days the majority black victims were murdered and most of the property in the black community was destroyed. While historians have criticized Major General Stoneman for failing to act quickly, his tepid response was consistent with federal officials desire to limit their involvement in the
daily affairs of black and white citizens of Memphis in the months prior to the Memphis Massacre. And, in the months that followed, despite the outrage in the black community and among northern Republicans, federal officials moved towards restoring power back to the state of Tennessee and relinquishing their control of local law enforcement.

Soon after the massacre ended military officials and the Freedmen’s Bureau set out to investigate the proceedings with the intention of holding the “rioters” responsible. Major General Stoneman sought assurances from local authorities that “the murderers and incendiaries will be arrested and punished.” But, despite assurances from the mayor that “rioters” would be punished, he deferred most law enforcement responsibilities to the state government.¹⁰⁰ And, three weeks after the massacre, one military official lamented, that “although many of the perpetrators are known, no arrests have been made, nor is there now any indication on the part of civil authorities that any are meditated by them.”¹⁰¹ In addition to these observations, General Fisk directed General Runkle to begin making preparations to confine in the military prison at Fort Pickering “those implicated in the late riots.”¹⁰² These actions coincided with the arrival of the congressional committee from the nation’s capital sent to investigate the “riot.” However, even though in the Congressional Report almost 70 known perpetrators were named, none were ever brought to justice.¹⁰³ In fact, on June 8, 1866, one bureau official reported that David Roach, the police officer African Americans most often identified in the mob, was in Memphis and still “on duty as a policeman.”¹⁰⁴
Meanwhile, political developments in the state of Tennessee resulted in its restoration back into the Union. The state already disenfranchised ex-Confederates and ratified the thirteenth amendment. In 1866, the state passed legislation that allowed blacks to testify in court and on May 3, 1866 passed the Metropolitan Police Bill, which resulted in the professionalization of the police force and created a board of Police Commissioners controlled by the state legislatures. In recognition of the state of Tennessee’s progress toward protecting African American civil rights the Freedmen’s Courts were disbanded by the end of May. This was done because bureau officials believed the “civil authorities would do justice and recognize equality before the law.” Whether or not the Freedmen’s Courts would have provided legal redress for black Memphians attacked during the massacre is not clear, but what is evident is that the federal government was no longer committed to supervising the protection of African American civil rights. And, in July of 1866, Tennessee ratified the Fourteenth Amendment guaranteeing citizenship rights to African Americans and was readmitted into the Union before Congress implemented its Military Reconstruction plan. Not long afterwards, in the fall of 1866, the United States military restored full authority back to the citizens of Memphis. As a result, just six months after one of the bloodiest episodes in post-Civil War history military rule in the city of Memphis ended.

Throughout this process, the struggle between migrants, authorities, and residents over newcomers’ place in Memphis continued. In an effort to minimize the tensions between black migrants and local residents, the Freedmen’s Bureau escalated its efforts to remove African Americans from the city to the countryside. The homes
of freed people were ordered to be inspected and those “occupying ground upon which they have no claim” were ordered to vacate. Those not employed were also arrested as vagrants and forced to enter into labor contracts with southern landowners. In addition, the massacre also exposed social divisions within the black community. Some of the city’s “most influential colored citizens” viewed the continuing presence of a large migrant population as a threat to their social status and the future security of the resident black community. Immediately following the massacre, a group of African Americans petitioned the Freedmen’s Bureau to be designated as labor agents for the city. They planned to “induce the surplus portion of the colored population” to enter into contracts with planters in the region in order to mitigate racial tensions. This clearly reflected emerging class divisions within the African American community and the “better class” of African Americans’ discomfort with the social and cultural lifestyle of former slaves from rural areas. Furthermore these plans for removal represented white and black residents’ continued tendency to stigmatize entire communities and categorize migrant behavior as responsible for the social problems in Memphis.

It is not clear how successful the bureau and local residents were in reducing this “surplus” population of former slaves. For former slaves the option to exercise their right to move represented one of the most accessible ways to respond to continued racial oppression. And, with their homes destroyed, their lives threatened, and few belongings to gather, many migrants simply fled the city after the massacre. Often, federal authorities provided transportation to accommodate their requests to
relocate outside of Memphis. Commenting on the migrant population in South
Memphis, Reverend Ewing O. Tade, missionary for the American Missionary
Association and pastor of Lincoln Chapel, observed that “a majority of the working
class were afraid to be seen, and hid themselves,” while others “left the place by cars
and boats.” As a result of the massacre, he continued, some of the members of his
congregation “have gone away and have not come back.”112 Others made similar
observations. Henry Porter, the owner of a black community store, noted that many of
those who lost their homes during the massacre were “gone.”113 The discriminate
nature of mob violence and the fear of continued racial tensions undoubtedly
motivated these decisions. More importantly, recently freed from slavery and lacking
long-term ties to Memphis, the decision to uproot and leave was part of a larger
pattern of intra-regional migrations that characterized former slaves’ struggle to gain
control over their daily lives.

But, just as many migrants chose to leave, others decided to remain in
Memphis suggesting a certain level of permanence and attachment to their new
surroundings. For remaining members of Lincoln Chapel the massacre reinforced the
importance of self-help and community to secure their place in the new social order.
Lincoln Chapel was one among several black churches burned down by the mob. In
response to its destruction, members expressed both disbelief and resolve to meet the
challenges of the massacres aftermath. “Quite a number of the parents came out, and a
large number of children,” Reverend Tade observed, to view the remnants of their
congregation. They not only “seemed to be very much troubled on account of it,” but
also “expressed strong feelings of attachment.” More than just a building, the church symbolized hope and the potential of their new lives as free people. As they gathered, Reverend Tade encouraged them not to be “discouraged,” that “there were enough ashes enough there to build another Lincoln Chapel.” And one week after the massacre, close to 100 members met to worship in an alternate location.  

In the following months, responses to the massacre’s aftermath actually helped strengthen social ties and bonds of fellowship among African Americans. The importance of civic institutions to establishing roots among former slaves in urban communities has been well documented by historians. Armistead L. Robinson, in his detailed study of the black community infrastructure in Memphis, identified over two hundred mutual aid and benevolent organizations in Memphis by the end of Reconstruction. Contrary to white southerners’ images of migrants in South Memphis, “evidence suggests,” Robinson argued, “that in Memphis the recently freed managed to survive the emancipation experience without relying either upon crime or upon agencies of public welfare.”  

Many of these associations were established soon after the Memphis Massacre. In the summer of 1866, for example, Joseph Colwell and other leading black Memphians organized the Colored Mechanics Benevolent Association. In addition to Joseph Colwell, whose building was burned down during the massacre, its members also included Wesley Ware who was also targeted by the mob.  

Much of this civic activism took place within the black migrant community. The autonomous black churches established during the Civil War played a central role
in facilitating community and nearness among a disparate migrant population. The church represented a place for worship, fellowship, and activism among men and women. They integrated migrants into the community, built schools, and provided social welfare. And, while four churches and twelve schools were destroyed during the massacre, the mob did not sever completely the social ties that made up these congregations. Instead, new mutual aid associations were established by the black Baptist and Methodist congregations to rebuild their churches. These included the Avery Chapel Building Fund and the Daughters of Zion Building Fund No. 1 for the First Baptist Colored Church. Members worked together and donated their time to organize efforts to raise money for the rebuilding of these social structures. And, in the process, not only did members express their wish to hold someone accountable, they also shared a desire to rebuild their lives as free people and secure a sense of belonging and connectedness amongst themselves.

Who was responsible for helping rebuild the black community was debated from the beginning. Immediately after the massacre ended, Major General Stoneman sent a letter to the Mayor of Memphis to inquire about the steps being taken by civil authorities to compensate individuals “for losses sustained and expenses incurred, caused by the recent riotous proceedings of the people of this city” and whether or not “all claims for such losses and expenses will be promptly paid by the city.” The mayor denied the city had any culpability. Even though civil authorities participated in the massacre and others tacitly condoned the mobs actions, he asserted, “city authorities have taken no steps or measures in the premises, and as I am advised of no
statute or law authorizing any such appropriation of money, I take it for granted that no action will be had.”118 On the other hand, while local officials denied responsibility, the Freedmen’s Bureau did take steps to rebuild the Freedmen schools burned down during the massacre. On May 9, 1866, in a letter to General O. O. Howard, General Fisk wrote that “the school houses will be rebuilt and the schools all open again in ten days.” While the bureau provided the resources, African Americans provided the labor. The Memphis Daily Post observed, on May 11, 1866, that a large crowd of African American carpenters “numbering from one hundred and fifty to two hundred” showed up for the jobs made available. As a result, on May 28, 1866, the Post reported, a new school house was reopened in South Memphis.119 The bureau’s dedication to rebuilding the Freedmen schools demonstrated the agency’s limited commitment to the social welfare of African Americans. When asked to help rebuild African American homes and churches they repeatedly noted they had neither the resources nor the authority.

The members of Avery Chapel were the most adamant in demanding that either the federal government or the city of Memphis provide the black community with compensation for their losses. Established during the Civil War, most of its members included black soldiers and their families in South Memphis. They first appealed to the Bureau for support. But, in a letter to the new Chief Superintendent General John Palmer, the assistant to the Assistant Commissioner wrote, that while “something has been done by the Bureau in the establishment of schools,” he concluded, “no authority exists for its contribution towards the erection of churches.”
Instead, the bureau responded to the congregation, that “the city of Memphis should pay the losses sustained by your congregation.” When Rufus McCain, a prominent member of Avery Chapel, appealed to the bureau for its help in making the city provide compensation, General Fisk was forced to clarify the agency’s position. In a letter to Rufus McCain, on July 30, 1866, Fisk responded, that no order was issued forcing “the city of Memphis to rebuild the churches destroyed in the riot.” Instead, while he believed the city “ought to pay” their congregation, he asserted, they should not expect any compensation.\textsuperscript{120} The failure of the bureau to provide African Americans with assistance demonstrated the limits of the agency’s post-war authority. And, for the victims of the Memphis Massacre, the inability to hold anyone accountable for the loss of life and property undoubtedly helped affirm their belief that only by working together could they expand the meaning of freedom to guarantee the protection of the integrity of their communities.

African Americans pooled together their own resources to rebuild the social institutions destroyed during the massacre. Horatio N. Rankin, a free black missionary from the North, for example, traveled north to raise funds for the rebuilding of the independent black Methodist church and school of South Memphis.\textsuperscript{121} Meanwhile, the congregation appealed to the local black community. They bought a lot and began building a new church. And, in the fall of 1866, the members of Avery Chapel organized a fair to raise money for “paying off the debt of the church for the lot and building now complete.” In order to rebuild their church they made it clear they were relying on the “charity” of “every generous colored citizen.” They were successful.
Despite the perceived meager resources of most former slaves, the congregation was able to raise over $1,000. Afterwards, leaders of the congregation attributed their success to the fact “that the members of said church turned out and built and established the foundation of said church, by and with their own labor.”¹²² Six months after the massacre, African Americans drew upon the strength of social ties to reestablish foundations of community life in ways that asserted their permanence to residents of Memphis.

The events surrounding the Memphis Massacre revealed competing notions of place and different levels of attachment among black migrants to their surroundings in South Memphis. While local residents and authorities used pejorative images to describe migrant behavior and stigmatize an entire neighborhood, migrants expressed a different image of their environment that indicated their struggle to create a sense of community and belonging. Similarly, African Americans level of engagement with the wider community varied. Less quietly, but no less importantly, the men and women of Beale Street First Baptist Church also began building a new church. Composed of primarily working-class migrants from rural areas, its members were less politically active than the members of Avery Chapel; however, they relied on the same sense of civic responsibility to build their congregation. These efforts over time helped nurture the friendships, associations, and closeness needed to allow newcomers to carve out a place for themselves in the post-Civil War environment.
Immediately following the Memphis Massacre a Joint Congressional Committee investigated the incident and interviewed witnesses, providing a detailed account of the episode in the record of the 39th Congress. While the incident is commonly known as the “Memphis Riot,” the majority report of the Republican delegation referred to it as a “massacre.” In this chapter, I have chosen the latter, which I believe is a more appropriate characterization of the nature of violence that took place in Memphis. See “Report 101 of the House of Representatives of the First Session of the Thirty-Ninth Congress,” in Memphis Riots and Massacres, Mass Violence in America (Miami: Mnemosyne Publication, reprint, 1969). (Hereafter cited as Report).


Memphis Daily Post, October 17, 1866, 8.


Bower, The Tragic Era.


In Altina L. Waller’s excellent examination of the “rioters” she challenges the interpretation that “the riot was largely the result of competition between Irish immigrants and black refugees for a dwindling number of unskilled jobs.” Most of the “rioters” were middle class and, she writes, “although not quite the ‘Gentlemen of Property and Standing’ that Leonard Richards discovered in the Jacksonian riots, they were obviously the leading citizens of this particular neighborhood.” Altina L. Waller, “Community, Class, and Race in the Memphis Riot of 1866,” Journal of Social History 18 (Winter 1984): 233-246. Also see Leonard L. Richards, “Gentlemen of Property and Standing”: Anti-Abolition Mobs in Jacksonian America (New York: Oxford University Press, 1970).


Accounts of African American labor were extrapolated from the Report, newspapers, and Freedmen’s Bureau Records. See, for example, the Complaint Book of the Freedmen’s Court in the Memphis District, July 24, 1865-November 20, 1865, Selected Records of the Tennessee Field Office for the State of Tennessee, Bureau of Refugees, Freedmen, and Abandoned Lands, reel 24. (Hereafter cited as RTFO).

For a discussion on urban black labor after the Civil War and the strategies former slaves used to gain control over the terms of their labor see Tera W. Hunter, To ‘Joy My Freedom; Southern Black Women’s Lives and Labors After the Civil War (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1997).

Complaint Book of the Freedmen’s Court in the Memphis District, July 24, 1865-November 20, 1865, RTFO, reel 24.
Post, April 12, 1866, 4.
Memphis Daily Argus, May 25, 1865, 3.
Report, 40, 127, 130, 131, 157, 164, 166, 192.


Joseph C. G. Kennedy, Population of the United States in 1860: Compiled from the Original Returns of the Eighth Census (Washington 1864). A census ordered by the city council concluded that there were 10,995 African Americans in Memphis out of a total population of 27,703. See Job Bledsoe, Census of Memphis, 1865. However, a census taken by the Freedmen’s Bureau concluded that in Memphis and on President’s Island that total black population numbered 16,509. See Freedmen’s Bureau Census, Records of the Memphis Sub-District, Reel 1 (Memphis and Shelby County Public Library). (Hereafter cited as RMSD).

Memphis Daily Avalanche, March 3, 1866, 2.
Memphis Public Ledger, May 22, 1866, 3.
Daily Argus, September 26, 1865, 3.
Avalanche, January 23, 1866, 2; February 16, 1866, 2.
Report, 199.
Report, 103.

Daily Argus, September 26, 1865, 3.

There were a number of confrontations between black soldiers, the city police, and black and white residents of Memphis. See the following: William Jericho to A. T. Reeves, October 15, 1865, RMSD, reel 22; Affidavit, Joe Brown, Third U.S. Colored Heavy Artillery, 1865, RMSD, reel 22; S. J. Garret to William L. Porter, February 17, 1866, RMSD, reel 22; S. J. Garret and William L. Porter to J. A. Copeland, RMSD, reel 22; Affidavit, Robert R. Church, February 17, 1866, RMSD, reel 22; Robert Cowden to A. T. Reeves, December 14, 1866, RMSD, reel 22; Memphis Daily Bulletin, January 31, 1866; September 26, 1865, 3; October 14, 1865, 3; Avalanche, January 14, 1866, 3; February 9, 1866, 2; February 24, 1866, 1, 3; Post, February 25, 1866, 8; March 6, 1866, 8. Also see Hardwick, “‘Your Old Father Abe Lincoln is Dead and Damned,’” 118.

Daily Argus, May 23, 1865, 3.
Report, 144.
Memphis Recorder’s Court, Shelby County Archives.
Report, 145.
Hardwick, “‘Your Old Father Abe Lincoln is Dead and Damned,’” 116-119; Waller, “Community, Class and Race in the Memphis Riot of 1866,” 235, 236.
Report, 187, 188.
Ibid., 140.
Report, 127, 130, 131, 140, 147, 164, 166, 192.
Report, 140. For additional accounts of drinking and socialization among black women in the post-Civil War South see Hunter, To Joy My Freedom, 165, 166.
Memphis Recorder’s Court.

Ibid., 131.
Report, 166.


47 *Post*, March 16, 1866, 4, 8.

48 When the widows of former black soldiers applied for their pensions or made claims for their bounty their marriages were often supported by members of the community. For example, in one case, Frank Talley testified that Jefferson Moulder and Jamie Moulder “lived together as man and wife after the usage and custom of slavery.” Or, in another case, Queen and Richard Smith lived together as man and wife in slavery and afterwards and were “so recognized by the community in which they lived.” RMSD, reel 9.

49 *Avalanche*, March 3, 1866, 2.

50 *Post*, March 16, 1866, 4, 8.


52 *Report*, 214.


54 *Report*, 286.

55 *Post*, January 28, 1866, 4.

56 See in *Post*, April 28, 1866, 8.

57 *Daily Argus*, September 26, 1865, 3.

58 *Avalanche*, February 24, 1866, 3.

59 Benjamin Runkle, April 26, 1866, Records of the Memphis Sub-District, Reel 1.

60 Historical literature on the Freedmen’s Bureau is extensive. Similar to early studies on Reconstruction, some of the earliest studies of the Freedmen’s Bureau criticized the agency for, as one historian noted, trying to do “too much too soon” for former slaves. See George R. Bentley, *A History of the Freedmen’s Bureau* (Philadelphia, 1944, reprint, New York, 1974), 214. One early exception was W. E. B. Du Bois, “Of the Dawn of Freedom,” in *The Souls of Black Folk* (New York: Penguin Classics, reprint, 1996). Since these early publications, the historiography on the Freedmen’s Bureau has gone through several revisions. For example, in the late 1960s and 1970s, scholars celebrated the intentions of the bureau, but concluded agency officials were not without racial prejudice and, as a result, the agency failed to take full advantage of its resources. See, for example, Louis Gerteis, *From Contraband to Freedman: Federal Policy toward Southern blacks, 1861-1865* (Westport, Connecticut: Greenwood Press, 1973) and William McFeely, *Yankee Stepfather: General O. O. Howard and the Freedmen* (New Haven: Yale University, 1968). As of late, Robert Harrison writes, historians have taken a “more balanced interpretation that acknowledges the elements of paternalism and prejudice that animated bureau officials and the legal and practical constraints under which they worked but nonetheless recognizes their assistance to former slaves in negotiating the transition from bondage to

64 David Tillson to Clinton B. Fisk, August 1, 1865, RTFO, reel 1.

65 David Tillson, August 27, 1865, RTFO, reel 1. As other scholars have suggested it was not uncommon for the federal government to work together with southern planters in order to ensure an economically dependent workforce. See Barbara Fields, Slavery and Freedom on the Middle Ground: Maryland during the Nineteenth Century (New Haven: Yale University, 1985). For an account of the Freedmen’s Bureau role in enforcing labor contracts in Memphis see Denoral Davis, “Hope versus Reality: the Emancipation Era Labor Struggles of Memphis Area Freedmen, 1863-1870,” in Race, Class, and Community in Southern Labor History, ed. Gary M. Fink and Merl E. Reed (Tuscaloosa: University of Alabama, 1994) and Hardwick, “‘Your Old Father Abe Lincoln is Dead and Damned.’”

66 Hardwick, “‘Your Old Father Abe Lincoln is Dead and Damned,’” 109.

67 Report; “Report of an investigation of the late riot in Memphis,” May 22, 1866, BRFAL, reel 34.

68 Report. See notes 3-7.

69 Sixty-five African Americans testified before the congressional committee, providing the most detailed account of their experiences during the Memphis Massacre. However, twenty-two African Americans provided testimony to the military commissioner organized by Major General George Stoneman and an additional one hundred and eighty-nine individuals provided affidavits to the Freedmen’s Bureau. One hundred and seventy-nine of those affidavits provided to the Freedmen’s Bureau were not accounted for in the congressional committee testimony or the military commission. These testimonies and affidavits are all located in the Report. Also see the “Affidavits from the Memphis Riots,” RACT, reel 34.

70 Most recently, Dylan Pennigroth demonstrates how property ownership among slaves was recognized by southern planters and legitimized by family and community relationships. Dylan C. Pennigroth, The Claims of Kinfolk: African American Property and Community in the Nineteenth Century South (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2003).

71 Report.

72 Post, February 1, 1866, 4.

73 Report, 200, 201.

74 Report, 62.

75 Ibid., 97.

76 Ibid., 172.

77 Ibid., 201.

78 Ibid., 234.

79 Ibid., 97, 98.

80 Ibid., 102.

81 Ibid., 160-162.

82 Report, 102.

83 Ibid., 193.

84 Ibid.

85 Report, 98-100.

86 Ibid., 115-117.

87 Ibid., 200.

88 Ibid., 160-162.

89 Ibid., 73, 74, 79, 80.

90 Ibid., 179.

91 Ibid., 77, 78.

92 Ibid., 180, 181.

93 Ibid., 99, 167, 173.

94 Ibid., 105.
106

95 Ibid, 167, 168.
96 Ibid., 102, 103.
97 Ibid, 162-164.
98 Ryan, “The Memphis Riots of 1866,” 244.
99 Report, 50.
100 Report, 53-55.
101 “Report of an investigation of the late riot in Memphis,” BRFAL, reel 34.
102 J. Jacobs to Benjamin Runkle, May 12, 1866, RTFO, reel 3; J. Jacobs to Benjamin Runkle, May 15, 1866, RTFO, reel 3; J. Jacobs to Benjamin Runkle, May 15, 1866, BRFAL, reel 34.
103 For a list of the “rioters” and a discussion of their socioeconomic background see Waller, “Community, Class, and Race in the Memphis Riot of 1866.”
104 June 8, 1866, RMSD, reel 1.
106 Clinton B. Fisk to Benjamin Runkle, May 19, 1866, RTFO, reel 1; Clinton Fisk to O. O. Howard, May 26, 1866, BRFAL, reel 34; Benjamin Runkle, Report for the Memphis Sub-District for the Month of May, May 31, 1866, BRFAL, reel 17.
107 Clinton Fisk to F. S. Palmer, August 1, 1866, RTFO, reel 3.
109 Clinton Fisk to Madison Warren, October 7, 1866, BRFAL, reel 1.
110 Report, May 14, 1866, RMSD, reel 1; J. Jacobs to Benjamin Runkle, May 15, 1866, RACT, reel 34; J. Jacobs to Benjamin Runkle, May 15, 1866, RTFO, reel 1, 3; Special Order, No. 66, May 19, 1866, RMSD, reel 19; W. J. Clark to David Tillson, August 27, 1866, RTFO, reel 1.
111 Petition, June 4, 1866, BRFAL, reel 16.
112 Report, 95.
113 Report, 168.
114 Report, 95.
116 Post, August 30, 1866, 8; Report, 343, 344, 346.
117 For a complete listing of African American mutual aid societies and their officers see the Registers of Signatures of Depositions in Branches of the Freedman’s Saving and Trust Company, 1865-1874, Memphis, Tennessee, National Archives, Records Group 101.
118 Report, 53, 55.
119 Post, May 11, 1866, 8; May 28, 1866, 8; Clinton Fisk to O. O. Howard, May 9, 1866, BRFAL, reel 34; J. Jacobs to Benjamin Runkle, BRFAL, reel 34; J. Jacobs to Benjamin Runkle, May 14, 1866, RTFO, reel 1; Benjamin Runkle, Report for the Month of May, May 31, 1866, BRFAL, reel 17.
120 Post, June 13, 1866, 8; J. Jacobs to F. Palmer, July 26, 1866, RTFO, reel 3; Clinton Fisk to Rufus McCain, July 30, 1866, RTFO, reel 1; Clinton Fisk to Rufus McCain, July 30, 1866, RTFO, reel 3.
121 Post, May 15, 1866, 8.
122 Post, July 31, 1866, 8; August 14, 1866, 8; October 17, 1866, 8; October 31, 1866, 8; November 20, 1866, 8; November 24, 1866, 8; Avery Chapel Trustees to F. Palmer, November 1867, RMSD, reel 11.
Chapter 4: Making Places

On July 4, 1866, African American men, women, and children, led by the Sons of Ham, a black mutual aid association, organized a parade and picnic on Independence Day to celebrate the end of slavery and the promise of freedom. They marched through the principle streets of Memphis, gathered together for food and dance, and made the day their own unique cultural event in contrast to the general indifference shown by southern whites to the holiday. Similar to other southern cities, former slaves in Memphis created their own political calendar of freedom celebrations and commemorations after the Civil War.\(^1\) In recognition of their new legal status, large crowds of former slaves gathered to claim equal access to civic space and the public sphere. But, while contemporary observers and historians have commented on the political significance of these celebrations, for the majority of former slaves their primary social importance was found in their ability to bring a disparate population of black migrants together to solidify their place in their new urban environment.

Most celebrations were neighborhood events.\(^2\) The Sons of Ham organized the 1866 Fourth of July celebration to increase the proceeds of their benevolent fund. Thus, by pooling their collective resources together, mutual aid societies were able to protect the social welfare of their members, add new members, and join with other neighbors dispersed throughout the city and surrounding area. Prior to the parade, a
number of black benevolent societies gathered at Colwell’s Hall, a building owed by a prosperous member of the Sons of Ham, where they “roamed” and “chatted” with participants in the garden outside the building. And after they paraded through the city’s principle streets, participants spread throughout the city to attend several picnics and neighborhood celebrations where the dancing and socializing continued until evening. In Memphis these community gatherings were quite common. Freed people celebrated West Indies Emancipation, the Emancipation Proclamation, and the anniversary of federal occupation in Memphis. By familiarizing former slaves with their new surroundings, helping them overcome the social and physical boundaries of city life, and making friends out of strangers these ceremonies transformed urban spaces into socially meaningful places.

In the post-Civil War era, African American freedom celebrations were a regular social fixture of southern public life. African American Fourth of July celebrations in particular received detailed coverage from the white press in Memphis. And, although coverage of these celebrations typically cast black Americans in a negative light, these accounts provide insight on the social and spatial relationships that governed African American daily life. By joining together on Independence Day, black Americans were able to project an image of solidarity to white residents and instill a sense of belonging among former slaves by asserting their right to public space. But, more importantly, because the majority of these Fourth of July celebrations were organized by the newly established mutual-aid and benevolent organizations in Memphis, they emerged within the context of a diverse population of
former slaves dispersed throughout the city. They provide insight into the range of alliances and personal relationships already established. African Americans joined together as friends and neighbors. And, even though the parades and celebrations provided black Memphians with opportunities to socialize across neighborhood boundaries as part of the larger community, these sodalities remained intact throughout these public rituals. Thus, a careful examination of personal interactions, corporate associations, and public ceremonies tells us a great deal about how former slaves used space and organized their daily lives to help secure a sense of belonging in their new urban environment.

Black Memphians’ understanding of place was not defined by the physical geography of the city. Memphis was still primarily a “walking city” lacking the modern modes of transportation that allowed residents to segregate themselves into distinct units of the urban landscape by economic and social conditions. However, the dispersed residential patterns of former slaves and the social and economic barriers they faced suggest a need to consider spatial relations and interpersonal dynamics in order to understand how they created a feeling of connectedness and community. By approaching the urban environment as a series of interlacing communities the multiple layers of social networks that helped bring about neighborhoods become visible. In Memphis, neighborhoods took shape around the friendships, community organizations, and civic ties that informed residents’ daily lives. In some cases, neighborhood life merged and blended with other communities in the city creating a complex web of social associations. It represented an arena of activity for everyday
life where common experiences were shared and collective identities were forged. Neighbors lived next door to each other, attended the same church, and belonged to the same organizations. The closeness of these associations added to black Memphians sense of community. Thus, by paying careful attention to patterns of neighborhood behavior it is possible to consider not only how former slaves conceptualized the physical landscape, but uncover the ways they established various levels of attachment to their surroundings that allowed them to become a part of the broader culture of civic life.

Unlike northern cities black residents lived throughout the city. Prior to the Civil War, slaves often lived behind the homes of white southerners. However, a number of slaves hired out their own time and lived away from their owners. In the 1850s, white residents complained about this practice and city authorities responded by passing tighter regulations designed to limit antebellum blacks’ residential patterns. Yet, blacks continued live away from their owners, sharing boarding houses with other working-class whites, or, in some instances, living by themselves. And, free blacks lived in clusters both inside and outside the city’s limits. When the war began the presence of Union troops at Fort Pickering meant that many migrants congregated in the area known as South Memphis, however, the lack of adequate housing, the continuing influx of black migrants, and the short four square mile radius of the city meant that the African American population spread out in the city. And, because the city’s total population increased by almost sixty percent after the Civil War it was
impossible for local residents to separate blacks from whites. They often lived next
doors to other whites or, in some cases, shared the same household. Boarding houses,
for example, sometimes housed both whites and blacks. And the lives of blacks and
whites crossed paths on a daily basis. They shared the same sidewalks, traveled the
same streets, and frequented the same business establishments. Black Memphians,
therefore, began to congregate in clusters in the city.

While residential patterns were fairly heterogeneous, African Americans lived
in some areas more than others. By 1870, African Americans resided in every ward in
the city. Yet, the lowest percentage of blacks lived in the center of the city. This area
south of Market Street and north of Monroe Street boarded the Mississippi River and
provided easy access to the city’s railroads. The second, third, and fourth wards
served primarily as the city’s business district, as a result white Memphians greatly
outnumbered black Memphians. Instead, the majority of African Americans lived in
the northern, southern, and eastern periphery, much of it designed to accommodate the
city’s growing population. Fifteen percent of African Americans lived in north
Memphis in an area that included the Chelsea neighborhood. This area bordered along
the Wolf River, a tributary of the Mississippi River. In the eighth ward, on the eastern
periphery of the business district, eleven percent of the African American population
resided in this area north of Adams Street, while another six percent took up residence
in the sixth ward located along the Mississippi River and south of Beale Street.
Moving east from the Mississippi River, five percent of the black population lived in
the fifth ward, a small amount compared to the thirty-three percent of African
Americans living in the seventh ward. The seventh ward was located in the south-eastern part of town and contained the largest population of African Americans. It was here where many of the city’s black businesses, churches, and associations were founded. The second largest black population lived in the Fort Pickering neighborhood in the tenth ward. This area was located on the Mississippi River in the most southern region of the city. In no ward in the city did black Memphians compromise a majority of the population. Instead African Americans were dispersed in areas throughout the city.\textsuperscript{10}

In the years after the Civil War, former slaves’ economic opportunities remained elusive and produced additional challenges to facilitating a sense of attachment to their surroundings. Yet, African Americans from the Mississippi Valley continued to migrate to Memphis. During the winter of 1868, federal officials observed that the number of African Americans coming to Memphis was continuing to increase.\textsuperscript{11} The oppressive labor conditions on the surrounding cotton plantations and the erratic labor demands among planters meant that Memphis was home to a geographically mobile, migrant class. However, between 1865 and 1870 there was no significant net gain or loss for the city’s black population. Instead, the African American population remained around 16,000 and many were able to establish roots in the city. Freedmen bureau officials commented on the diversity of this population in 1868. In Memphis, there were a number of former slaves who owned their own property, leased land, and built “comfortable homes” by finding “constant employment in their daily vocations.” On the other hand, many black Memphians
struggled to find dependable employment and pay their monthly rent, while a large number, officials reported, remained idle because their was no work available.\textsuperscript{12} Regardless of their employment status, most black Memphians struggled daily to secure a living for themselves and their families.

They engaged in a variety of occupations. The 1870 federal census contains the most complete list of occupations for black men and women within the city limits. Out of a list of 4,359 African Americans identified by occupation, they worked in over 140 different types of jobs. Fourteen percent of working men and women engaged in some sort of trade. Black men found work as carpenters, barbers, brick masons, and blacksmiths, while two percent of wage-earning women labored as seamstresses, hairdressers, and dressmakers. Less than three percent of the working population was identified as either professionals, storekeepers, or clerical workers. Instead, the overwhelming majority of black men and women provided unskilled manual labor. The city’s economic position as the largest inland cotton market meant there was always a need for a steady supply of cheap labor. Black Memphians provided the labor necessary to move cotton back and forth from the railroads to the river. Twenty-six percent of workers were simply identified as general day laborers, while seven percent of laborers worked on the steamboats traveling up and down the Mississippi River and another two percent provided manual laborer on the levee. In addition to this back-breaking work, six percent of African American workers provided the labor necessary to sustain trade and transportation within the city’s limits. They worked as draymen, hack drivers, express men, and teamsters. Finally, another twenty-eight
percent of African Americans labored in the service economy. African American porters represented the fifth highest occupational category among black men, while other black men worked as servants and cooks. And, out of the 1,175 wage earning black women in Memphis, sixty-eight percent were domestic laborers and twenty-six percent worked as washerwomen. As this data demonstrates, the black working-class experience in Memphis was diverse.\textsuperscript{13}

For many African Americans work limited their physical mobility in the city. The economic specification of black male labor meant that during working hours they had little opportunity to forge new bonds of fellowship. African American men worked in brickyards, lumberyards, and warehouses. These stationary social spaces left little room for friendships outside of work. And, in some instances, the physical distance between work and home was minimal. For example, sixty-eight percent of workers on the levee in the 1870 federal census lived in the third ward. The third ward was located in the center of the city and bordered the Mississippi River and contained the second smallest proportion of black Memphians. The short distance between work and home meant that not only was their knowledge of the city limited, but their social interactions were limited as well. Other workers shared the same household. While river workers were widely dispersed throughout the city, it was not uncommon for them to live together in the same boarding house.\textsuperscript{14} Thus, for a large number of black men their labor restricted their access to the entire city and provided few opportunities to forge new relationships outside of work.
Other occupations allowed African Americans to move freely about the city and expand the physical and social boundaries of their daily lives, however. A majority of African American skilled male laborers worked in the construction trades as carpenters, painters, and plasterers. Many found work both inside and outside their communities. The cyclical nature of construction meant they were always moving about the city from one job to the next. In addition to the construction trades, black men labored in other occupations that expanded the scope of their urban environment. In 1867, the Memphis Daily Post reported that “hundreds of mechanics” were able to find steady employment throughout the city. And, African American draymen held one of the most mobile and socially influential occupations in the city. “Several hundred drays,” the Post reported, were “owned and worked by colored men, some individual men owning as high as seven to twelve each.” Draymen represented the seventh largest occupation among African Americans in Memphis. Owing and operating a dray not only allowed black men to accumulate capital, but their work also made them well known in the city. They hauled goods throughout the city allowing them to travel from neighborhood to neighborhood on a daily basis, work in close proximity to white Memphians, and bridge the physical distance that separated black Memphians. Therefore, given the scope of their physical environment, it is not surprising that many of these male laborers became some of the most socially and politically active black citizens in Memphis.

African American women also lived in an urban environment heavily influenced by their labor. Similar to black men, the physical existence of some wage
earning women was limited by their work. The majority of working-women labored as domestic servants, for example. A small minority of these women lived in white households, their lives circumscribed by the daily demands for their labors. Most domestic laborers did not live with their white employers, however. The importance of family and kinship relations and the fear of sexual exploitation in the workplace undoubtedly made working-women less willing to live in white households. As a result, several hundred black women traveled to and from work on a daily basis. In addition, over 300 black washerwomen were listed in the 1870 federal census. These women occupied the public arena, and, as other scholars have suggested, challenge the notion that urban spaces in the late nineteenth century were strictly a male terrain. Yet, these working women represented only a minority of the African American female population. Similar to rural areas, many black women stayed at home. In the same federal census, 1,936 women were listed as working at home. This number represented more than forty percent of the total number of wage earning women. As a distribution center dependent on manual labor, the number of economic opportunities available to women in the city was limited. More importantly, in addition to this economic reality, African American women projected an image of respectability, helped secure the welfare of their families, and protected themselves from being potential victims of violence and sexual exploitation by remaining at home. But, even though working at home may have restricted the scope of their urban environment, their daily chores and social activities undoubtedly placed them in contact with other residents in close proximity.
While Memphis was not a segregated city, race relations represented an additional barrier to establishing personal relationships in the urban landscape. African Americans frequently contested their right to public spaces previously restricted to white Southerners through their leisure activities. In Memphis, black laborers often congregated in the central business district. They gathered on the streets and sidewalks outside local businesses. And, because blacks and whites frequented the same business establishments confrontations over the use of public spaces were common. The local press, for instance, complained about the practice of river workers gathering outside local grocery stores on Jefferson Avenue. These laborers, the Memphis Public Ledger charged, “hang around obstructing the sidewalk in such a manner that ‘poor white trash’ have to take the road.”22 And, local merchants complained about the habit of African Americans “congregating in large numbers” on Adams Street.23 African Americans were regularly arrested for sidewalk obstruction on the charge of vagrancy as a result.24 African American laborers also congregated together at the black owned and operated saloons in the center of the city. There were two black saloons on Union Avenue between Second Street and Main and a third located just three blocks to the north on Jefferson Avenue.25 At these drinking establishments, they not only found camaraderie in their working-class experiences, but they also developed new friendships that transcended their working-class identities. It was not uncommon for large numbers of African Americans to congregate both inside and outside these establishments. They drank and socialized with one another on a daily basis. This led to confrontations with the local police. In
February of 1867, Robert Church, the owner and operator of one of the saloons on Union Avenue, was arrested by police when he drew a pistol and fired on officers, while they were trying to clear the sidewalks of African Americans congregating outside of his establishment.²⁶

The absence of segregation meant African Americans had access to the entire city. For numerous black men and women their labor took them away from their homes, families, and neighbors. As they traveled from home to work they moved throughout different parts of the city and gathered together with other black Memphians. In the process, they were able to overcome some of the economic and social barriers that separated them and establish new bonds of fellowship. By doing so, to borrow the words of Elsa Barkley Brown and Gregg D. Kimball, they “mapped out their homes and neighborhoods in ways that ignored the corporate boundaries of the city.”²⁷ These relationships were, however, subject to pressures from the unpredictable labor demands of the local and regional economy, the intraregional migration patterns of former slaves, and the lack of social and economic capital necessary to maintain a widespread network of independently owned and operated leisure and business establishments. Thus, the neighborhood represented the most predictable, and familiar, physical and social space to facilitate the necessary face-to-face contact needed to nurture a feeling of connectedness with their surroundings. This nearness was not maintained by social proximity alone, but rather by degrees of attachment that demonstrated an individual’s personal relationship and investment in
their communities. As a result, neighborhoods had meaning to former slaves’ daily lives and influenced the nature of civic engagement with the community at-large.

The establishment of a Memphis branch of the Freedman’s Savings and Loan Trust Company provides a good starting point to examine the personal relationships and corporate associations that helped bring about a familiarity and community. The Freedman’s Bank originated as a savings institution to encourage thrift and economic responsibility among black Union soldiers. Similar to most white northern missionaries and humanitarians, its founders believed that in order for former slaves to become citizens they needed guidance and instruction in the standards of middle-class respectability. The Freedman’s Bank was chartered on March 3, 1865, and soon branches were established in Memphis and other southern cities. Horatio Rankin, a free black missionary from the North, made the first deposit in Memphis on December 28, 1865 and the bank was a modest success for eight years until its failure in 1874. African Americans made over 6,000 deposits to the bank during its existence. They made deposits, however, not just as individuals, but rather as representatives of the numerous black churches and mutual aid societies in Memphis and as residents of multiple neighborhoods in the city and surrounding area. The deposit slips cross-referenced with city directories, census data, and city maps provide detailed information on not only how black Memphians made a living, but where they lived and who they associated with on a daily basis. As a result, an examination of the individuals, the churches, and the benevolent societies and trade associations that used
The Freedman’s Bank sheds light on the social spaces former slaves inhabited for a decade after the Civil War.

The Freedman’s Bank in Memphis had a rather unassuming start. Black Memphians made only 280 deposits during its first two years of operations. Similar to other branches, the bank lacked support in the black communities. Freed people were not against saving money, rather many former slaves were either unaware of the purpose of its existence or suspicious of its activities. In the past, former slaves were victims of violence and theft at the hands of white southerners and northerners and landowners swindled them from their earnings. Therefore, it is not surprising black Memphians were reluctant to use this institution. As a result, on March 11, 1867, local officials observed the Freedman’s Bank was unable to pay for its own expenses. National officials considered closing the Memphis branch all together. Instead, the management of the local branch was reorganized to ensure its success. C. C. Dickinson, a janitor and member of Beale Street Baptist Church, was appointed as the bank’s first black cashier. And, an advisory board with black community leaders was created to increase the number of black depositors. The advisory board included “all the ministers of the colored churches, all the male teachers of the colored schools and the remainder are the most prominent and influential colored people in the city.” Board members were undoubtedly chosen because of their economic and social status. Memphis advisory board members included clergymen, teachers, barbers, draymen and bricklayers. They also represented well known African Americans all over Memphis, enabling them to reach black migrants living in enclaves throughout the
city. These changes proved successful. In the years that followed, black Memphians used the Freedmen’s bank to ensure the welfare of their families and establish a semblance of permanence in their community.

Most of the depositors were former slaves. A majority migrated to Memphis from the cotton plantations in the Mississippi Delta and outlying areas. These records provide information on black Memphians’ previous residence. In an examination of 1,957 individuals, African Americans migrated to Memphis from over 450 different counties throughout the American South. The majority, however, were from Tennessee and Mississippi, including 40% who migrated to Memphis from the cotton producing counties of southwestern Tennessee and northern Mississippi. And, while many of these migrants were born in areas throughout the American South, most lived a majority of their lives on the cotton plantations established in the Mississippi Valley during the second quarter of the nineteenth century. Simon Turner, for example, was born in South Hampton County, Virginia, while, he was raised in La Grange, Tennessee, just east of Memphis. Others like, Benjamin Russell, knew little about their birth place. Russell only knew he was born somewhere in Virginian since he lived most of his life in Mississippi. While others like Lavina Davis were born and raised on cotton plantations in the Mississippi Delta. Davis was born and raised in Panola County, Mississippi, before she migrated to Memphis during the war. Countless other black Memphians shared similar experiences. As a result, the deposit slips from the Freedman’s Savings and Loan provides insight on the interpersonal relationships among the recently arrived black migrant class.
A majority of the depositors were also members of the black working-classes. Some of the first deposits were made by the city’s leading black professionals and entrepreneurs. J.H. Sailor, a former slave and successful carpenter, made one of the first deposits as well as S. H. Toles, a well-known black physician. An examination of 2,793 individuals and their occupations, however, demonstrates that African American depositors were more representative of the total black working population. African American skilled workers made up only fourteen percent of depositors, while five percent engaged in the same type of profession, including thirty-five clergymen. Twenty-eight percent of African American men and women identified themselves as unskilled laborers. This included 190 general day laborers and 250 washerwomen. Elizabeth Harris, for example, a washerwoman and former slave from West Tennessee, opened an account on March 13, 1867. And, thirteen percent of black depositors worked in the service economy as domestic laborers, cooks, and porters. Another eight percent of depositors included draymen, express men, hack drivers, and others providing trade and transportation services in the city. And, since African Americans outside the city limits also used the Freedman’s Bank another twenty-two percent of depositors included agricultural laborers. Many of these black men and women lived on the cotton plantations in northern Mississippi and southwestern Tennessee that surrounded Memphis. Because many of these black laborers engaged in the same occupation, worked together, and shared the same work space their lives often crossed paths on a daily basis. Their labor, however, only partially defined the city’s social and physical landscape for African Americans in Memphis. The numerous black churches,
associations, and personal relationships these individuals established provide important information on the residential and civic activities that fostered shared feelings of belonging.

Neighborhoods typically developed around black churches. By 1875, there were eighteen African American churches in Memphis. These churches were spread throughout the city to accommodate the widely dispersed residential patterns of black Memphians. Because churches served a variety of religious, social, and political purposes their community function sometimes meant more than their particular denomination. They provided opportunities for former slaves to socialize and create a sense of community. It was at church where strangers became friends, newcomers were introduced to their neighbors, and the foundation of black organizational life was laid. And, while some churches were identified by the material condition of its members, in most cases, these early black churches provided black men and women of different socio-economic status the opportunity to come together. The absence of detailed church records for these early black churches means that membership information must be pieced together from limited historical data. Fortunately, black Memphians use of the Freedman’s Bank demonstrates the crucial role churches played interpersonal dynamics. In order to open new accounts and disburse financial savings to the appropriate individual, family member, or heir, bank officials collected a wealth of personal information, which sheds light on the multiple neighborhoods and communities that made up black Memphis. African American clergymen accompanied black men and women from the neighborhood to the bank to open new
accounts and serve as witnesses. And, black men and women often identified themselves by church affiliation and, in some cases, listed individual churches as one of their primary beneficiaries. By using these records it is therefore possible to come closer to understanding the social and physical terrain that helped shape the personal lives of a predominately formerly enslaved black working-class population.

The proliferation of Baptist churches during and after the Civil War era helped link together a community of migrants and former slaves. These congregations began as a “brush arbor” and their membership increased because of the continuing influx of formerly enslaved people from the Mississippi Valley. As these Baptist churches grew they helped facilitate social relationships within the black community. On Sundays former slaves gathered for religious services, while during the week they met for prayer, religious study, and community initiatives. Because the Baptist church incorporated many of the cultural traditions practiced during slavery they were able to attract new members. The local press, for example, complained about the day long services held by the Beale Street Baptist Church accompanied by “screams” and “hollers” that they charged were a nuisance to the community.39 While white southerners viewed these collective practices a nuisance, many former slaves considered mass participation essential to their cooperative religious experience. These cultural practices were undoubtedly rooted in West African traditions still salient in the nineteenth century, further separating black Baptists from their white southern counterparts. The religious gatherings, periodic revivals, and mass baptisms held during the Civil War era, therefore, helped bring newcomers into the community.
Julius Jones, for example, a former black soldier from Louisiana discharged in Memphis, noted that soon after the war he joined the Baptist church after he “got religion” while lying in a war hospital. The first meeting he attended was in a “brush arbor” in Memphis where, he stated, “when the call came for moaners, I went to the bench and when I said ‘amen,’ I couldn’t rise from the seat.”\textsuperscript{40} Other former slaves shared similar conversion experiences amongst a community of believers. During the fall of 1866, the Beale Street Baptist church organized a revival and over several weeks they baptized and added over 100 new members.\textsuperscript{41} These were public events intended to tie the individual to a religious community.\textsuperscript{42} During these mass baptisms, hundreds of men and women joined together, and, as Jenny Owen, who attended baptisms in Alabama, Nashville, and Memphis, noted “dey would start shoutin’ en singin’” on the way from the church to a local body of water where participants were immersed in the water and reborn.\textsuperscript{43} It was also not uncommon for members from various congregations throughout the city to gather for these important religious occasions. The communal nature of these religious gatherings, therefore, established important social relationships necessary to build communities. An examination of individual congregations further demonstrates the important role black churches played in creating neighborhoods.

Beale Street Baptist Church was one of the largest Baptist congregations in Memphis. Morris Henderson, a former slave, established this independent black church in the winter of 1865. Henderson, who was born a slave in Virginia, migrated to Memphis in 1847 and worked as a carriage driver prior to the Civil War. Similar to
many urban slaves, Henderson held religious services in the basement of a white church. His congregation’s decision to abandon the First Baptist Church and move to a “brush arbor” was representative of the decision countless other former slaves made who looked to define their freedom by establishing congregations free from white supervision. Soon there after, Henderson’s congregation raised $5,000 and, in October of 1866, purchased a lot on Beale Street for a new church. Located on the corner of Beale and Desoto Street, the congregation successfully built a new church by relying on the cooperative traditions of self-help to create a permanent structural foundation to their new community. The church was an important symbol of “race progress” and became a leading social and political institution in the city. By 1870, the church had over 2,000 members and Henderson became a respected community activist in Memphis. The churches location in the fifth ward just west of the heavily black populated seventh ward made it ideally suited to serve the predominately black working-class population in south Memphis.  

As Beale Street Baptist church grew it helped link together newcomers and long-term residents, along with black men and women of different economic status. Most members of Beale Street Baptist Church were migrants who arrived in Memphis during the Civil War era. Eveline Ford was born in Warren County, North Carolina and arrived in Memphis in 1865, while another member, James Hamilton, who was born in Clarksville, Tennessee and lived the majority of his life in northern Mississippi, arrived in Memphis during the Civil War. Others like Samuel Johnson, a former Union soldier, was born and raised in southwestern Tennessee before
migrating to Memphis during the war. Not surprisingly, an examination of fifty-eight individuals associated with Beale Street Baptist Church reveals that all but three identified themselves as being born outside of Memphis. In addition, while their previous residence before the war is often unknown, wartime migration patterns makes it reasonable to suggest that most new members came to Memphis from the Mississippi Delta and outlying areas. It was not uncommon for migrants and long-term residents to attend the same congregation, however. James Robison, for example, a member of Beale Street Baptist Church, was born and raised in the Memphis area. And, even though the majority of members were unskilled laborers working as washerwomen, general day laborers, wood cutters, and river workers, skilled laborers and economically affluent African Americans were also associated with the same church. Draymen, carpenters, barbers, and seamstresses attended Beale Street Baptist church.\textsuperscript{45} C. C. Dickinson, an antebellum free black barber, was a member of the church and one of the wealthiest African Americans in Memphis. The 1870 federal census estimated the worth of his real estate at $5,000.\textsuperscript{46} Thus, so soon after the Civil War, class divisions were often less important to regulating power relationships and group association than social status, personal relationships, and community affiliation.

For countless freed people the church played a crucial role in bringing them into their communities. One of former slaves’ first responses to emancipation was to migrate in search of family members to reconstitute familial social relationships. And, many spouses separated during slavery reunited in urban areas where they validated
their unions legally. In Memphis, military officials observed, that “free and married, they will maintain marital relations as sacredly as any other race.”47 During the Civil War, because military officials restricted access to enlisted men to women who were legally married, numerous freed people married at contraband camps in Memphis.48 The church, however, played a central role in overseeing moral standards in African American communities. As a result, countless other former slaves looked to the church to legalize slave marriages. Morris Henderson, for example, married John Ashford, a migrant from Kentucky, to his partner in Memphis, as well as Sam and Julia Logan from Marietta, Georgia, and Parker and Angelina Morgan, migrants from eastern Arkansas.49 Unlike marriages by white missionaries, these unions were community sanctioned events. In the process, black migrants not only claimed a right denied to them in slavery, but they projected an image of respectability to their friends and neighbors that validated their place as members of a community.

The church also assisted newcomers trying to navigate the new urban landscape by familiarizing them with their surroundings. It was at church were members learned about social events, political issues, and community services.50 Since Morris Henderson was on the Freedman’s Bank’s advisory board he played a crucial role in its success, often accompanying residents to the bank to open new accounts. Lavina Green from Jackson, Tennessee and Tom Nelson from Fayette County, Tennessee were just two examples of African Americans accompanied by Reverend Henderson to make a deposit. And, given the central role churches played in securing the welfare of its members, it is not surprising that many of Beale Street
Baptist church members entrusted their financial savings to Reverend Henderson and his congregation. Lizzie Fisher, a washer woman from Fayette County, Tennessee, Lucinda Holmes, a seamstress from Mississippi, and Richard Reedus, from Limestone, County, Alabama, all designated Morris Henderson as their primary beneficiary. As a result through the actual banking process, African Americans were building and reinforcing community networks. Where individuals lived and the churched they belonged to contributed a great deal to determining the level of attachment they experienced with their surroundings.

Members’ close proximity to the church and each other undoubtedly strengthened their sense of belonging. While the lack of segregation meant black Memphians moved throughout the city, their social lives were often passively reinforced by the physical geography of the city. Most churchgoers belonged to congregations in their neighborhoods. For example, out of forty-two individuals identified associated with Beale Street Baptist Church thirty-three lived in close proximity to the church. Elizabeth Brown, a widow born and raised in Charleston, South Carolina, arrived in Memphis just after the Civil War and lived on Beale Street a few blocks east of the church, while Anna Dickens from Richmond, Virginia arrived in Memphis on April 27, 1867 and resided on the corner of Third Street and Gayoso Avenue just a couple of blocks north of the church. It is impossible to know whether these two women knew one another, however, the church provided a central location for them to meet for religious devotion and socialize with other former slaves. Other members followed a similar pattern. Thomas Green, a laborer, and George Reedus, a
wood cutter from South Carolina, both lived just a few blocks east of Beale Street Baptist Church. Thus members often lived next door to one another, traveled the same streets, and crossed each other’s paths on a daily basis. When they joined together at Beale Street Baptist Church they created friendships and alliances that defined their sense of belonging in Memphis. These social relationships, however, moved beyond ward boundaries in ways that often overlapped with the other neighborhoods in Memphis. Beale Street Baptist church is just an example of one religious institution that former slaves relied upon to create new bonds of fellowship after the Civil War. A similar pattern emerges among additional black congregations.

Avery Chapel was another prominent black church in the area. Horatio Rankin, an African American missionary and teacher from the north, founded this African Methodist Episcopal congregation during the Civil War. Most members lived in south Memphis, however, unlike Beale Street Baptist Church, its location embodied a more explicit political meaning. Avery Chapel was built just outside the central business district more towards the center of the city. It expanded the boundaries of black neighborhood life and demonstrated African Americans’ right to the entire city. Not surprisingly, Avery Chapel became a center for political activity. And, many well known members were also part of the city’s emerging middle-class. Teachers, barbers, carpenters, and other socially affluent black Memphians attended. One of its members, Columbus Polk, became the cashier for the Freedman’s Bank, while Rufus H. McCain, another member and former slave, owned and operated several drays making him one of the wealthiest African Americans in Memphis.
Avery Chapel included members of the antebellum free black community as well. Joseph Clouston, for example, purchased his freedom before the Civil War and became a visible political leader in the black community. But, even though most former slaves preferred the decentralized Baptist congregations, this did not prevent working-class migrants from attending. Catherine West and Anna Jackson were both former slaves from the southern interior who washed and ironed clothes for a living. Avery Chapel’s pastor, Page Tyler, was a former slave from Arkansas. And, while the church maintained close ties with northern missionaries, one reason it attracted former slaves from the rural countryside was because, as one historian observed, the church incorporated many West African rituals practiced throughout slave into its services. The church, therefore, helped cultivate a constant discourse between long-term resident, migrants, and the city’s diverse working population living in the area.

Another neighborhood further south was the Fort Pickering community located in the tenth ward. Salem Baptist Church served this area. In 1867, Africa Bailey, a former slave from Mississippi and member of the Beale Street Baptist Church, established this satellite congregation. Located in the tenth ward on Carolina Street, mostly working-class black migrants from the Fort Pickering area attended this congregation. Talbot Shelton, an unskilled laborer from Brownsville, Tennessee, William Thomas, a wood cutter from northern Mississippi, and Washington Williams, a farmer from northern Mississippi, were all three associated with Salem Baptist Church and living on Carolina Street. Lavina Henderson and Mary Herd, both widows, also lived within a few blocks of Bailey’s church. Neighborhood boundaries
remained fluid, however. Lucinda Cave, for example, an African American washerwoman, lived in the sixth ward, in close proximity to both Beale Street and Salem Baptist Churches. A member of Bailey’s church, Cave’s daily life brought her in contact with residents of the Fort Pickering neighborhood and members of Beale Street Baptist Church, demonstrating how social encounters opened up possibilities for the creation of a variety of different personal relationships. Neighborhoods, therefore, were not just places for the creation of alliances, but also encompassed competing loyalties among former slaves.

Similar to south Memphis, it is possible to see how neighborhoods took shape around religious institutions in north Memphis as well. Reverend William H. Brinkley’s Middle Baptist church was located in north Memphis on Quimby Avenue. Its members included farmers, blacksmiths, unskilled laborers, and washerwomen. While little information exists on the majority of its members, what data is available suggests most members lived in close proximity to the church. Margaret Collins, a washerwoman from Richmond, Virginia, lived a few blocks west of the church, while Robert Pleasants, a blacksmith, lived down the street. And, other churches located in north Memphis suggest neighbors forged a variety of different sodalities. By 1875, five different African American congregations were located in north Memphis. These churches were dispersed throughout the area. Ebenezer Baptist Church, for example, was located in the northern suburb of Chelsea where a small black neighborhood was located. These churches provided central locations essential to establishing familiarity and reciprocal relationships of shared responsibility. As neighbors joined
together for religious services and social activities, black Memphians strengthened existing friendships and created new ones, giving meaning to the physical spaces they inhabited.

Regardless of church membership or denomination, African Americans also organized numerous mutual-aid and benevolent organizations to help create black neighborhoods, establishing a vital community network of family, kin, friends and neighbors. These societies served multiple political, social, and cultural purposes. Members pooled together their resources to aid the sick, the poor, and provide death benefits to spouses and family members of the deceased. They also helped resolve differences among members, regulate standards of behavior, and cultivate a tradition of community responsibility. And, while secret societies and benevolent associations were ubiquitous among white Americans, they had roots in West African societies and the communal customs among enslaved African Americans. It is plausible, Michael Gomez suggests, that “long before their introduction” to European versions of secret societies African Americans were familiar with similar African-based organizations that they adapted to meet the challenges of slavery. These cooperative social networks were inherently tied to the religious community and nurtured an alternative system of informal governance that valued local autonomy. By maintaining these cooperative traditions after slavery, African Americans were able to bring a dispersed population of former slaves together into a series of interlacing communities.
In Memphis, African Americans belonged to almost 100 different organizations. They made over 200 deposits to the Freedman’s Bank between the years 1866 and 1874. The deposit slips contain a wealth of information on over 350 individuals associated with the different mutual aid and trade associations in Memphis. These records have been subjected to detailed examination. Armstead Robinson, in his survey of black leadership in Memphis, identified a split between religious and benevolent organizations from those engaged in political activity. While political leadership lay within the more skilled and entrepreneurial classes, the community’s institutional infrastructure was dominated by the formerly enslaved black working-class. And, others demonstrated that many of these mutual aid associations were led by unskilled working-class women. In other words, not only was the black community able to organize for the benefit of others, but it was largely the result of the leadership and involvement from unskilled African American men and women. “Real leadership for the internally oriented institutional infrastructure,” Robinson wrote, “came from the black ministers and from among the lower-class blacks.” Robinson’s study played a crucial role in furthering historical knowledge of class divisions within black communities and the social and cultural disconnect between black political leaders and the majority formerly enslaved working-class population. It, however, only partially explains how communities were created and shaped the political boundaries of African American life after the Civil War. Most of these organizations were neighborhood associations that represented the competing
corporate interests and decentralized power relationships exhibited among freed people.

African Americans established a broad spectrum of church groups, benevolent societies, trade associations, masonic orders, and social organizations. Mutual aid and benevolent societies represented fifty-one percent of these associations. The majority of these benevolent groups emerged from the neighborhood churches dispersed throughout Memphis. Members were linked to each other by an array of satellite associations. Twelve different branches of the Sons, Daughters, and Sisters of Zion were established in the Memphis area. There were also four Social Benevolent Societies and three Union Forever Societies associated with African American churches. Another fourteen church groups (14%) were listed in the deposit slips from the Freedman’s Bank. As a result, forty-nine percent of these organizations were affiliated with a local church. Most of these organization combined benevolent, religious, and social functions. Congregations raised money for churches, schools, and the poor and the destitute by relying upon donations and community fund raisers. It is impossible to determine whether the other fifteen benevolent groups (19%) were associated with any African American church. The remaining organizations were also not clearly linked to a black congregation. These included eight Masonic orders and lodges, seven social groups, and two special interests organizations, while another nine percent represented the different trade associations and workers’ cooperatives in the area. And, while a comparative analysis of the different types of organizations sheds light on social stratification in the black community, it is possible to see how
community relationships informed the diversity and complexity of neighborhood life by examining organizations individually.

More often than not, the leaders of the religious and benevolent organizations were chosen from a cross-section of the black community. The Union Forever Association, one of the largest benevolent groups in Memphis, included river workers, laborers, and levee workers, along with blacksmiths, carpenters, and book keepers as officers. The United Sons of Zion, affiliated with the Beale Street Baptist Church, chose not only draymen, clerks, barbers, and porters for its officers, but also farmers, hand cart operators, and cooks. The lack of economic opportunities in Memphis after the Civil War undoubtedly influenced the multi-class dimensions of the black public sphere, making it difficult to characterize individual organizations by occupation alone. Based on the leadership structure of these organizations, it is reasonable to suggest that its members included skilled and unskilled workers of various economic means. These benevolent groups also brought together migrants and long-term residents. Solomon Green, for example, secretary of the United Sons of Zion, was from North Carolina and had been living in Memphis since the late 1840s, while Henry Shepherd, who was born in Memphis, lived a majority of his antebellum life in eastern Arkansas and served as President, and Peyton Pettit, a former slave from southwestern Tennessee, later served as Treasurer. By belonging to one of these organizations members strengthened communal ties, while leaders elevated their social status in the community. As a result of the cooperative nature of these organizations, they helped cultivate a collective identity, build alliances amongst a
diverse working population, and foster democratic social spaces that valued mass participation.

Even two of the most socially and politically influential benevolent organizations reflected the inclusive character of black public life in Memphis. The Sons of Ham and the Independent Pole-Bearers were able to carve out an influential space for themselves in local politics after the Civil War. The leaders of the Sons of Ham consisted of carpenters, drivers, porters, and upholsters. However, officers were not solely limited to the skilled and economically stable. There were two accounts of unskilled working-class African Americans attaining an established position within the Sons of Ham. Henry Boyd and John Polk, both identified as general laborers, were elected as officers. The leadership structure of the Independent Pole-Bearers resembled the Sons of Ham in that it leaned toward the skilled working-class members of African American communities. However, here again, this did not rule out the possibility of a general labor gaining an official office within this association. Of eight known members of the Independent Pole-Bearers three represented that unskilled working-class. In addition, many of the leaders of both organizations could not be located in various city directories suggesting that they may have been new to the area, most likely lacking a sufficient job, or that they did not hold a stable residence or employment in Memphis. As a result, while the leadership framework of these two organizations leaned toward the more economically stable, they did not exclude members of the unskilled working-classes.67
But, as other scholars have shown, men were not the only community activists.\(^6\) These organizations also increased the power and status of African American women. Just as organizational life reflected the multi-class dimensions of the black public sphere, men and women shared the social and political burden of defining freedom. In Memphis, black men and women often labored together to secure the social welfare of their communities.\(^6\) Eighteen benevolent and church groups included both men and women, while another seven organizations listed only female officers. The majority of these associations were affiliated with one of the city’s black churches. And because the church encouraged active participation from both men and women it is reasonable to conclude women were not marginalized in the decision making process. In fact, most likely men were included for record keeping purposes, while women played a dominant role in the day-to-day operations. The women who participated reflected the democratic character of black religious organizations. Female officers of Beale Street Baptist Church’s Sisters of Zion included a housekeeper and two washerwomen, along with Mary Bradshaw, the wife of a prominent barber and community activist. The majority of African American female community leaders identified were unskilled wage earning women. They included cooks, washerwomen, and domestic laborers. And, while most women identified were wage earning women, this did not preclude women who worked at home from being included. Jennie Bickford, who was married to a drayman and worked at home, was an officer of the Daughters of Zion, along with Martha Ware, a seamstress and wife of a prominent mechanic. These organizations therefore
promoted a collective discourse among married women, single women, and widows and women of various ages, creating unlikely alliances that suggest neither class nor gender alone determined who shaped public life in the black community.\textsuperscript{70}

Regardless of the economic status or gender of organizational leaders, friends, neighbors, and fellow churchgoers often belonged to some of the same associations. By looking at where officers and members of individual organizations lived it is possible to see how these personal relationships shaped the social and political boundaries of black Memphis. Since the majority of benevolent groups emerged from African American churches, they typically represented different neighborhoods. Africa Bailey, the pastor of the Salem Baptist Church, and his wife, Emma Bailey, along with Rebecca Jackson, and Nana Wilson were officers for the Sisters of Zion in Fort Pickering, while Morris Henderson, pastor, served as treasurer of the Sisters of Zion for the Beale Street Baptist Church, which included other members living in the area. Both Henry Shepherd, president of the Sons of Zion, and Washington Robinson, a member of the Finance Committee, lived on Desoto Avenue between Beale and Gayoso Street on the same block as the Beale Street Baptist Church. Other organizations followed a similar pattern. For example, members of the Union Forever Society’s finance committee included skilled and unskilled workers from the same area. Guy Anderson, a blacksmith, Washington Carruthers, a carpenter, Henry Crooms, a levee laborer, along with Samuel Primnel, another levee worker, all lived in South Memphis within a few blocks of each other.\textsuperscript{71} Members shared the same streets, frequented the same public places, and interacted with one another on a
daily basis. Because they shared the same physical space, black Memphians with various economic means were able to nurture personal relationships that helped validate their social status in the community. Similar to slaves on adjoining plantations, African Americans relied upon these personal connections to create alliances, build loyalties, and offer security to their family, friends, and neighbors.

Since freed people congregated in clusters throughout Memphis and the surrounding area, the deposit slips of the Freedman’s Bank show the diverse network of community associations in the region. In north Memphis, for example, former slaves established the Social Benevolent Society No.2 and further north in the Chelsea suburb the Social Benevolent Society No. 14 was created. Ann Lewis and Eliza Brown were officers for a branch of the Daughters of Zion along the Wolf River in north Memphis, while, on Memphis’ eastern border, members of Providence Chapel established the Sons and Daughters of Zion No.3. These organizations also extended to rural areas. Freed people organized at least three benevolent groups, the Sons and Daughters of Zion No. 4 and the Young Men’s and Ladies no. 2, in the farming community on Presidents Island. In addition, members of Daughters of Zion No. 1 from Edmondson, Arkansas in Crittenden County traveled almost twenty miles to Memphis to deposit their savings in the Freedman’s Bank, while the Sons of Ham No. 3 from Desoto County, Mississippi relied upon the banks services as well. As a result, freed men and women from the surrounding area were constantly moving in and out of Memphis, expanding the social and political horizons of their daily existence. Neighborhoods were not isolated, rather residents maintained close ties
with the regions urban, suburban, and rural population. They frequently merged and blended together revealing the multiple alliances and interpersonal relationships that helped former slaves establish a sense of belonging in their new surroundings and integrate them into the community at-large.

These intra-community dynamics were frequently on display during the numerous post-Civil War freedom celebrations African Americans held in Memphis. For a decade after the war, local newspapers made reference to a vibrant public life among former slaves. They joined together on Emancipation Day, the anniversary of federal occupation and West Indies Emancipation Day to celebrate freedom and the promise of better days to come. African American Fourth of July celebrations in particular received detailed coverage from the white press. And, although coverage of these celebrations typically cast black Americans in a negative light, these accounts do provide insight on the social and political landscape that governed African American public life. By joining together on Independence Day, black Americans were able to project an image of solidarity to white residents and instill a sense of connectedness among former slaves by asserting their right to public space, making new friends, and becoming part of civic life. Because the majority of these Fourth of July celebrations were organized by the newly established mutual-aid and benevolent organizations in Memphis, they emerged within the context of a diverse population of former slaves dispersed throughout the city. As a result, they provide insight into the range of alliances that made up black Memphis. African Americans joined together as friends
and neighbors. And, even though the parades and celebrations provided black Memphians with opportunities to socialize across neighborhood boundaries, these sodalities remained intact throughout these public rituals. Freed people celebrated as members of a church or benevolent society and as leaders or residents of their respective communities. These public events therefore contained multiple meanings. While asserting to white Southerners their rights and privileges as American citizens, they also facilitated personal relationships in ways completely separate from white culture.⁷³

For most white residents of Memphis, the Fourth of July lost much of its meaning after the Civil War. It seemed somehow inappropriate to white Southerners to celebrate nationalism after fighting a war that destroyed national unity. It especially seemed inappropriate to whites, while the North still occupied the region and the majority of ex-Confederates were disenfranchised. Thus, white Memphians had little regard for either the Union or for any holidays celebrating the nation. At a congressional hearing following the Memphis Massacre, for example, a Union general reported on this lack of patriotism. He commented that “if a love of the Union and the flag was considered loyal he would look upon a large majority of the people of Memphis as not being loyal.” The general observed that the United States flag was only displayed at three locations in Memphis: Army headquarters, the Freedman’s Bureau, and the office of the Memphis Post. This lack of patriotism was found throughout the region. Retired major general Carl Schurz commented after touring the South that there was “no national feeling” in the region.⁷⁴ Therefore, it is not

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surprising that white Southerners refused to celebrate the Fourth of July. In 1867, the Memphis *Daily Appeal* reported that “the Fourth can at present be appropriately celebrated by only one class in the South – the radicals, and as a partisan holiday.”\(^7\)

The Memphis *Daily Post* reported in 1869 that the Fourth was “celebrated. . . only by our German and colored citizens.” Furthermore, the newspaper commented that “the rebel press groans about oppression and tyranny” and white southerners “do not have it in their hearts to celebrate as in the glory years of the past.”\(^7\)

White southerners rejection of the Fourth of July continued throughout the post-Civil War era, leading one newspaper editor to conclude it “a day of minor importance” in the South since the war between the North and the South.\(^7\)

It might have been a day of minor importance to whites, but to African Americans in Memphis, the Fourth of July became one of the major public holidays. Prior to emancipation, the words of the Declaration of Independence proclaiming equality and freedom from tyranny rang hollow for most African Americans. George Jackson Simpson, a former slave from Missouri, noted that during slavery July the Fourth “was not really our holiday,” a sentiment shared by Benjamin Russell, a former slave from South Carolina, who charged, “the Fourth of July meant very little to the slave people.”\(^7\)

In the North, Independence Day had often been a day of protest. Frederick Douglass, in his famous speech in Rochester, New York, on the character of this national holiday, stated, “Your high independence only reveals immeasurable distance between us. The blessings in which you, this day, rejoice are not in common.” Furthermore, Douglass lashed out, “this Fourth of July is yours, not
This changed after the Civil War. To former slaves the words of the Declaration of Independence finally seemed to contain more than mere promises. Louis Hughes shared the new feeling of excitement this day brought to freed people in his slave narrative. Hughes noted, “it was appropriately the 4th of July when” he returned to Memphis with his family in 1865. “Hundreds of colored refugees thronged the streets,” he observed. Held for generations in slavery, for Hughes and countless other former slaves, Independence Day represented the “Freedom, that we had so longed for, had come at last.”

The participation of former slaves and newly arrived migrants in these freedom celebrations meant they shared familiar characteristics with earlier slave gatherings. In northern antebellum slave communities, for example, African Americans gathered to celebrate Pinkster Day and Election Day in the rural countryside and on the outskirts of cities. These were uniquely African American events that expressed their desire for local autonomy. And, while southern slave gatherings like Jonkonnu and corn shucking were often held under the supervision of plantation owners, the dancing, music, and food made these cultural events distinct from white Southerners. Many of these cultural traits were derived from their West African heritage enabling them to overcome differences and build communities. And, slaves from neighboring plantations often came together to visit during these events, building new relationships and strengthening old ones. These bonds of fellowship, Anthony Kayne concludes, represented one way slaves were able to create neighborhoods. Many of these social relationships were made underneath the gaze of white Southerners. On holidays, like
Christmas and the Fourth of July, slaves were typically given the day off. And even though the political significance of Independence Day meant little to African American slaves, this did not preclude them from gathering to socialize. “They gathered in groups,” Louis Hughes observed, “talking, laughing, telling tales they had from their grandfather, or relating practical jokes that they had played or seen played by others.”

Similarly, post-Civil War freedom celebrations helped establish connections among African Americans. This was evident in the proliferation of Emancipation Day celebrations that accompanied the end of slavery in the American South. In Memphis, on January 1, 1866, the Sons of Ham organized a parade in recognition of their new legal status as free people. This was the first of several Emancipation Day celebrations in Memphis. In 1867, a number of mutual-aid and benevolent organizations paraded through the city streets and gathered afterwards to hear political speakers and socialize together. The participation of different benevolent societies meant black residents from throughout the city attended these events. They shared stories and danced together, but unlike slavery, these personal interactions were most likely energized by the excitement of their emancipation. This celebratory fervor often led to confrontations with white residents. On June 6, 1866, for example, the Sons of Ham organized a celebration in honor of the fourth anniversary of federal occupation. Freed people joined the festivities to drink, dance, and find company with each other. White residents complained about the zealous and unruly behavior of African Americans, leading to arrest of black residents for “being drunk, and abusing
white gentlemen,” during this event. But, while white residents criticized former slaves growing assertiveness, black Memphians undoubtedly experienced a sense of camaraderie in their common experience as free people contesting their right to public space.

African American Fourth of July celebrations also played a role in promoting unity among a dispersed population of former slaves. These festivities were accompanied by music and dance, a common characteristic of slave festivals. Large crowds of African Americans, the Memphis Daily Post reported in 1866, danced throughout the day. And similar to slave gatherings, they gathered to eat and drink in excess. These social occasions provided former slaves with opportunities to transcend their working-class experience and unite as free people. Because many of these social activities exhibited cultural connections with former slaves’ West African heritage they also encouraged a sense of community. Historians have noted, for example, the centrality of the circle to West African and American slave culture to honor the ancestors. And, during the 1867 Fourth of July celebration, local newspapers observed participants dancing in a “ring.” Whether or not this “dancing ring” resembled the counterclockwise dance found in West African and American slave cultures is not clear, however, the dancing and singing that accompanied these festivities were undoubtedly familiar to the former slaves participating. Other cultural continuities existed as well. Scholars have long acknowledged the importance of music to West African religious ceremonies. The drum was especially important to maintaining spiritual connections with ones ancestors and community. So, even
though these Fourth of July celebrations resembled nineteenth century American culture, the movements and sounds exhibited during these festivities made them African American events. Parades were accompanied by fife, drum, and fiddle music as African Americans marched down city streets. The African characteristics were unmistakably recognizable to a community of former slaves.

Who participated in these celebrations? The information provided suggests that these celebrations consisted of a rather larger portion of the African American population in the Memphis area, with thousands participating. It is impossible to know exactly how many people attended these events, however, Memphis newspapers frequently remarked on the size of the crowds that joined together on this national holiday. On 4 July 1866, the Memphis Daily Post reported that “the colored people turned out in mass to see them [the parade], and the crowds accompanied them to the grove.” In 1867, the paper estimated that two thousand were in attendance and in 1869, 1875, and 1877, the papers suggested that five thousand African Americans joined to celebrate. The accuracy of these numbers is unknown, but these estimates indicate a consistently large display of celebratory fervor. In fact, there is some evidence to suggest that these Fourth of July celebrations helped construct communities from a dispersed population. In 1872, the Memphis Daily Appeal reported that “several car loads with them [African Americans] arrived from Brownsville. Several other car loads with them [African Americans] arrived by the Charleston road.” The paper also commented that they arrived by “foot, on horseback, by river, by wagon, . . . and made an immense army.” At the very least, the Fourth
of July in Memphis established bonds of fellowship by severing the distance between African Americans in the area.

Yet, more than racial solidarity, Independence Day celebrations reveal the interpersonal dynamics that made up black communities in Memphis. The level of mutual-aid society participation in these celebrations provides insight into the range of people involved in these public commemorations. Two benevolent groups in particular that contested for leadership in Memphis were the Sons of Ham and the Independent Pole-Bearers. These two associations planned parades leading the participants down Memphis city streets and organized picnics in different neighborhoods. The Sons of Ham were one of the first organizations to plan and lead a Fourth of July celebration in 1866, while reference to the Independent Pole-Bearers first appeared in 1868, until they finally replaced the Sons of Ham as the primary organizers in the 1870s. Other male and female benevolent groups assumed leadership roles as well. In 1868, the Social Benevolent Society No.2 organized a celebration, inviting the other benevolent societies to attend. And many of these organizations participating in these gathering underscore the inclusive character of these public events. The Daughters of Zion was a very influential benevolent organization in Memphis during the post-Civil War era. First mentioned in the 1867 parade, its members participated in many of these ritual events and even created their own celebrations. In 1875 and 1877, the Daughters of Zion organized a social gathering at the Exposition building in Memphis. Some additional groups that were particularly visible during these celebrations included the Sons of Zion, the Sisters of...
Zion, the Mutual Relief Associations, the Young Men’s Association and the Union Forever Societies. As a result, these commemorations emerged with the context of a predominately working-class population of former slaves representing the different sodalities of black Memphis.

One of the most revealing aspects of these celebrations was the parade. They were not radical demonstrates, but they sometimes reminded whites that local African Americans had power, and that they were willing to go beyond their traditional neighborhood boundaries. The majority of the parades occurred in the center part of the city outside African American communities. The parade routes general proceeded along streets north of Vance Street up to Poplar. This physical area can best be understood as the central core of Memphis. The regions to the south and north of this area contained the majority of the African American population. The southern part of these parade routes would usually be the point of origin, and depending on the destination, the various African Americans societies would either proceed north or march north and return south at the end. The reports of these parades generally noted that the participants march through the “principle streets” in Memphis. African Americans paraded down Main, Poplar, Second, Adams, and Union. The marches also parade down Gayoso, Desoto, Beale, and Vance.\textsuperscript{96} Therefore, not only would the parades travel past the Beale Street Baptist Church, a symbol of “race progress,” but they marched past the former slave markets on Adams Street and throughout established sections of town. In 1875, for example, the Memphis \textit{Daily Appeal} noted that “in and around Court Square the Negroes congregated in great numbers.”\textsuperscript{97} These
places undoubtedly contained a number of conscious and subconscious meanings for black Memphis who occupied these spaces. The marchers proceeded in full public view, thus expanding the boundaries of their urban environment, while affirming their rights as American citizens to the large white communities.

But, in the process of claiming their right to public space, celebrations also reinforced alliances and the multiple layers of individual attachment within black communities. A typical event at this time followed a prescribed order. The parades usually began at the hall of one of the African American organizations, followed by public gatherings at a park, picnic grove, or building. Evidence suggests that participants probably arrived in groups representing the different benevolent organizations in Memphis. Prior to the 1867 celebration, members “assembled at their various places of meeting” before they marched.98 And they paraded through the city in the order of their different societies and left together to join various neighborhood celebrations. As a result, these public rituals are important tools to gage not only interracial relations, but also look into the various corporate interests that shaped black Memphis. The lack of segregation meant that African Americans could readily cross neighborhood boundaries, but, the social relationships that informed their daily lives remained visible throughout these celebrations.

One obvious distinction in the parades was between men and women. While both male and female organizations participated, the manner in which they paraded sometimes differed. In the 1875 procession, male and female societies paraded together but with a “carriage containing the queen of the day and maids of honor.” In
addition there were “twelve carriages containing female members of the societies,” while the men most likely walked. 99 This may have been a reflection of Victorian sensibilities designating the street as a male terrain and intended to present an image of cultural respectability. In most of the processions reference was not made to different modes of transportation, however. This did not mean there were not other gender distinctions. Men and women often paraded at different times. On 4 July 1868, the female organizations paraded separately from the men. The Memphis Daily Post reported that the male societies gathered at a “later hour” than the female organizations. In 1869, the women assembled to parade at nine in the morning, while the men gathered together at eleven in the morning. 100 A final difference was the length of the parade. In 1868, the female societies not only gathered at an earlier hour, but also traveled a shorter parade route. The route for women was considerably shorter in the celebration of 1869. The male organizations proceeded down a total of eight streets, compared to three for the female societies. 101 These gender differences reveal just how tenuous black women’s place in public life was in Memphis after the Civil War. While they were not removed from the public arena all together, gender differences prevailed and suggested concerns for female respectability may have circumscribed their public role in these events.

Another distinction in the parades was the appearance of the different benevolent organizations. The organization of these marches was always noted in the local press. The 1869 female procession proceeded in the following order: Band of Music, the United Daughters of Ham, the United Daughters of Zion No. 1, the Sisters
of Zion No. 2, the Sisters of Lincoln Relief Society, the Sisters of Benevolent Society
No. 2, the Sisters of Mutual Relief Society, and the Sisters of Zion. Similarly, the
male procession organized in the following order: Chief Marshall of the Day, Grand
Marshals of the different societies, Band of Music, the United Sons of Ham, the
Benevolent Society No. 1, the Union Forever Society, the Independent Pole-Bearers,
the Young Men’s Association, the Sons of Zion, the Mutual Relief Society, the
Lincoln Relief Society, the Benevolent Society No. 2, and the Gymnastic Society.102
Whether or not the procession reinforced the ranked order of the different societies is
not clear, however, members frequently used parades to secure prestige for themselves
and their organizations. In Memphis the order and appearance of the participants were
consistently noted. In 1866, for example, the Memphis Daily Post commented that
“all were neatly dressed in holiday attire,” while the Memphis Daily Appeal, in 1872,
reported that their was “not a single disturbance.”103 For the working-class or the
socially marginalized parades helped elevate their social status in the black
community. Therefore, the attention to order and appearance in these celebrations was
as much a self-conscious attempt to gain respect from white Southerners as it was an
attempt to gain respect in the black community at-large.

Benevolent societies looked for ways to distinguish themselves from other
organizations. Each group designated itself with flags and banners, for example. In
1867, as African Americans paraded throughout the city, marchers were “drawn up in
line and decorated with regalia of their several orders.”104 The various male
associations, in 1869, marched in procession with “each society bearing a banner, with
the name of the society and the date of organization. . . wearing the regalia of his
order,” while the female society members also wore “banners with appropriate
inscriptions.” Carrying these flags and banners allowed participants to announce
their place to white and black citizens as respectable members the community. It also
allowed organizations to demonstrate their social importance to the crowds of
onlookers. Since benevolent societies competed amongst themselves for members
they most likely looked for ways to elevate their prestige in their own neighborhoods,
and the larger society.

Clothing represented another way participants could define themselves in
relation to others. Frequently it would be mentioned that the participants were
“neatly dressed in holiday attire” or dressed in an “endless variety of costumes.”
Others were in “full regalia.” On the Fourth of July, various military organizations
often paraded “in their handsome uniforms.” Regardless of the phrase used to
depict the appearance of African Americans who participated, dress played a vital role
in the image they presented. Clothing could undoubtedly depict class and affluence,
but could also be used to transcend working-class experiences and forge a collective
identity. For the independent barber or blacksmith it could designate his position in
the community. Likewise, for the washerwoman or laborers who paraded through the
streets, dress helped claim a position of respectability among their peers. How
individuals dressed was a source of competition. In 1867, a picture of “Lincoln and
his family” was given to the female society making the best showing. Appearance
therefore bestowed notoriety upon the benevolent group that won. While most games
can be characterized as simple social play, what is noteworthy is that competition was organized around group identity. These events were designed to represent the multiple community interests and neighborhood associations founded in Memphis.

In many years, leading African American societies held separate celebrations and public gatherings. These celebrations often reflected the character of the participants. In 1866 and 1867, two Fourth of July celebrations were organized. President’s Island, the location of one of the largest contraband camps in the South during the Civil War, was the site of one gathering. In 1867, prominent black and white Republican politicians attended and addressed the crowd. Another celebration, led by the Sons of Ham that same year, took place at the Memphis Fair Grounds. This event drew a larger crowd than the one at Presidents Islands, probably due to the nature of the participants and the purpose of the event. President’s Island organizers were much more affluent than the majority of the African American population in Memphis. Edward Shaw, a future county commissioner; A.T. Shaw, a white law clerk; and John Harris, a black lawyer, led this gathering. It was also primarily a political event designed to garner support for the Republican Party. This was noted by the local press who gave a slanted view of the day’s speeches. The Memphis Daily Appeal reported that the participants were led by “radical white politicians . . . designed for grinding the political axes.” At the fair grounds, leadership came from the benevolent organizations and the celebration was a social event accompanied by music, dancing, and singing. As a result, African Americans were able to gather free from white supervision.
African American benevolent organizations frequently competed amongst themselves for support from the black community as well. While the benevolent organizations typically participated in the same parade, they sometimes held separate events afterwards. In 1868, the Social Benevolent Society No. 1 held a public gathering at a picnic grove in the center of Memphis. The participants included the United Brothers of Zion, the United Sons of Zion, and other benevolent organizations. The Sons of Ham held a celebration in the same area attended by numerous benevolent groups. “The occurrence of these two large colored picnics,” the Memphis Daily Post observed, exhibited a “little spirit of rivalry between them,” though “without any unpleasantness.” Similarly, in 1873, the Sons of Ham and the Independent Pole-Bearers both organized a picnic after the parade. Many of these gatherings reflected a division between the religious and secular mutual-aid societies. In 1875, for example, four different celebrations were held by the following: The Sons of Ham No. 1 at Humboldt Park, the Sons of Ham No. 2 at James Park, the Independent Pole-Bearers at the Fair Grounds, and Church-affiliated benevolent groups at the Exposition Building. All these celebrations were widely attended and reflected the diversity and complexity of the black community in Memphis.

These public gatherings served another important community function. They were fund-raising events for the various mutual-aid and benevolent organizations. The 1866 celebration organized by the Sons of Ham was “organized for benevolent purposes” with the money raised “to increase the benevolent fund,” a characteristic shared by other celebrations. This may be one reason why benevolent groups
organized separate social gatherings. In 1879, for example, the Sons of Ham planned a picnic “for the purpose of raising funds to replenish their treasury, the amount so received to be dispersed among the sick and . . . burial for destitute members.”

Several African American churches of different denominations also held a picnic “to raise means for church purposes.” African Americans relied on these collective strategies of self-help to ensure the welfare of a predominately working-class black migrant population. Benevolent groups competed for financial support among a dispersed population of former slaves and these celebrations reflected the different social ties that defined black neighborhood life in Memphis.

As important as these celebrations were to providing African American societies opportunities to add new members and increase the proceeds of their treasury probably their most important social function lay in their ability to strengthened black migrants sense of belonging in a new urban environment. Most of these gathering were neighborhood events providing residents from the area a place to celebrate with friends and family. They may have lived next door to each other or belonged to the same church or benevolent organizations. In addition their lives may have crossed paths on a daily basis as they traveled to and from work or going about their daily chores. These social gatherings enabled them to strengthen these relationships away from the monotony of their daily existence. “They [African Americans] scattered in several groups throughout the ground,” the local press noted of one celebration. It is reasonable to suggest they knew one another and their familiarity made these gatherings joyous events. The “various games and dancing” accompanying these
events helped introduce new residents to the community and provided strangers the opportunity to meet people from the same neighborhood. These alliances played a crucial role in providing former slaves with stability as they looked to meet the challenges of defining the meaning of their freedom by transforming urban spaces into socially meaningful places.

Wherever black Memphians lived they created vital community frameworks to oversee their daily lives. Whether it was at work or home the friendships they made influenced the social and political boundaries of their public life. Despite the lack of segregation, African Americans sense of place was heavily influenced by the personal relationships they nurtured in their neighborhoods. They traveled the same streets, congregated in the same public places, and visited the same stores and business establishments. These were more than just casual acquaintances. Because neighbors often belonged to the same church or benevolent organization they frequently knew one another. When they joined together for public events, they did so not as strangers, but as friends and neighbors. As a result, even though their experiences as former slaves and free people cultivated a spirit of racial solidarity amongst a disparate population of black migrants, the black population was diverse. African Americans created a complex web of personal relationships that helped integrate them into the wider community. And, these personal relationships helped nurture a sense of belonging and attachment in their communities that African Americans experienced and expressed in politics.
rury parades and the socio-space allowed former slaves to become part of the wider black community and pay minimal attention to the socio-spatial relationships that helped bring about familiarity and community in neighborhoods.


2 Both Elsa Barkley Brown and Gregg Kimball and Shane White note the importance of public celebrations for creating a sense of community amongst a disparate population of former slaves. Overtime, however, African American freedom celebrations changed. In the North, slave festivals were replaced by parades and a more conscious attempt by the black middle-class to distance themselves from slavery and their African heritage, while in the South in the late nineteenth century parades and public rituals became more confined within black neighborhoods. Therefore, as the common bond of slavery became more distant, parades and celebrations revealed more and more social distinctions within the black community. Brown and Kimball, “Mapping the Terrain of Black Richmond,” 77; White, “‘It was a Proud Day.’” 55-59. In Memphis, even though the common bond of slavery remained strong, these parades and celebrations reveal how personal relationships informed the competing corporate interests already taking shape among Black Memphians soon after the Civil War. More so than class distinctions or long-term or migrant status, post-Civil War celebrations provide insight on the social relationships that help bring about neighborhoods.

3 Daily Post, July 6, 1866.

4 These “ways of operating” provide insight into how individuals re-appropriated space by transforming them into what Michel de Certeau identifies as their “own ‘proper’ place.” See Michel de Certeau, The Practice of Everyday Life, Translated by Steven Rendall (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1984), xviii-xx. Similarly, city spaces, Brown and Kimball write, represent “an amalgam of fluid public spaces and institutions culturally defined by the inhabitants.” How Black Americans used public spaces and interacted with each other on a daily basis provide insight not only into race relations, but “intracommunity” relations. As a result, by looking at spatial relations it is possible to map out the personal and community alliances among African Americans that help bring about their own “proper” place. Brown and Kimball, “Mapping the Terrain of Black Richmond,” 67, 83. For an additional examination of the creation of black urban neighborhoods see Tera W. Hunter, To ‘Joy My Freedom: Southern Black Women’s Lives and Labors after the Civil War (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1997), 44-73. Both Brown and Kimball and Hunter, however, focus primarily on how the use of public space allowed former slaves to become part of the wider black community and pay minimal attention to the socio-spatial relationships that helped bring about familiarity and community in neighborhoods.
Scholars disagree on what constitutes a neighborhood. Most urban studies consider neighborhoods, however, more than just distinct units of the American landscape defined by their residential structures and physical attributes in close proximity. Rather neighborhoods are defined by a variety of socio-spatial attributes such as structural characteristics, social proximity, and income as well as social activities, familiarity, and the degree of social interaction. More so than proximity, there are degrees of socialization and attachment that help facilitate the creation of neighborhoods. See, for example, Edward Casey, *The Fate of Place: A Philosophical History* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1997); George Galster, “On the Nature of Neighborhood,” *Urban Studies* 38 (May 2001): 2111-2124; Ade Kearns and Michael Parkinson, “The Significance of Neighborhood,” *Urban Studies* 38 (August 2001): 2103-2110; Patricia Mooney Melvin, “Changing Contexts: Neighborhood Definition and Urban Organization,” *American Quarterly* 37, no. 3 (1985): 357-367. Recent studies on slavery and emancipation have emphasized both the importance of interpersonal relationships and place to understanding the social and physical boundaries that informed enslaved people’s daily lives. See Stephanie M. H. Camp, *Closer to Freedom: Enslaved Women and Everyday Resistance in the Plantation South* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2004); Anthony E. Kaye, *Joining Places: Slave Neighborhoods in the Old South* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2007); Dylan C. Pennigroth, *The Claims of Kinfolk: African American Property and Community in the Nineteenth-Century South* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2003). Contrary to Anthony E. Kaye’s assertions, however, neighborhood and community are not mutually exclusive categories. Rather neighborhoods provide an effective medium to examine the reciprocal relationships that helped establish a feeling of community.

The lack of segregation after the Civil War meant the urban black population was typically dispersed in enclaves throughout southern cities. Brown and Kimball, “Mapping the Terrain of Black Richmond,” 69; Hunter, *To Joy My Freedom*, 45.


For a discussion of the South Memphis neighborhood see the previous chapter.

While blacks typically lived in clusters, an examination of the ninth federal census shows that racial boundaries were relatively fluid. Population Schedules of the 9th Federal Census, 1870, City of Memphis, Wards 1-10.

Population Schedules of the 9th Federal Census, City of Memphis, Wards 1-10. Armstead L. Robinson used this data to divide the black working population between skilled, unskilled, and professional to conclude the majority of black Memphians were poor and members of the southern working class. While the economic opportunities for freed people were limited, skill level did not always determine one’s material condition. A drayman, for example, while considered an unskilled laborer may have been able to improve his economic position. The same can be said for a washerwoman. And, as Robinson noted, one’s economic condition did not necessarily determine an individual’s social status in the community. Armstead L. Robinson, “‘Plans Dat Comed from God’: Institution Building and the Emergence of Black Leadership in Reconstruction Memphis,” in *Toward a New South? Studies in Post-Civil War Southern Communities*, ed. Orville Vernon Burton and Robert C. McMath Jr., (Westport, Connecticut: Greenwood Press, 1982).

Elsa Barkley Brown and Gregg Kimball contend that work often limited black men’s exposure to the urban environment. Brown and Kimball, “Mapping the Terrain of Black Richmond,” 91. While this was true for many African American men, because many men were self-employed and constantly in search for work it is reasonable to suggest that their labor took them throughout the city, if not daily, at least quite often.

Robinson, “Plans Dat Comed from God.”
Rufus C. McCain, for example, owned and operated several drays and was a leading political activist in Memphis. One of the best studies on black washerwomen in the nineteenth century remains Hunter, *To 'Joy My Freedom*. Hunter was able to show how the nature of washerwomen’s labor helped nurture collective bonds of fellowship that encouraged working-class solidarity.


Most black churches in Memphis began as a “brush arbor,” therefore lacking membership records. Work Progress Administration Church Records, Box 30, Tennessee State Library and Archives.

In Memphis, many marriages were made because military officials restricted access to enlisted men to women who were legally married. Beverly G. Bond, “Every Duty Incumbent Upon Them: African American Women in Nineteenth Century Memphis,” in *Trial and Triumph: Essays in Tennessee’s African American History*, ed. Carroll Van West (Knoxville, 2002), 210. Because military officials shared traditional patriarchal assumptions that once black women were married the federal government would no longer need to provide support they often resorted to coercive measures to force men and women living together as husband and wife to legally marry. Nevertheless, black men and women continued to live together according to the customs of their life during slavery. These relationships were undoubtedly accepted by community standards. *Daily Post*, March 16, 1866, 4, 8. This evidence suggests former slaves were often divided on the practice of legal marriage.


**Footnotes:****

41 *Daily Post*, September 10, 1866, 8; September 17, 1866, 8; October 1, 1866, 8; October 15, 1866, 8.
43 Rawick, *An American Slave*.
45 Registers of Depositions of the Branches of the Freedman’s Saving and Trust Company.
46 Population Schedules of the 9th Federal Census, City of Memphis, Wards 1-10.
48 In Memphis, many marriages were made because military officials restricted access to enlisted men to women who were legally married. Beverly G. Bond, “Every Duty Incumbent Upon Them: African American Women in Nineteenth Century Memphis,” in *Trial and Triumph: Essays in Tennessee’s African American History*, ed. Carroll Van West (Knoxville, 2002), 210. Because military officials shared traditional patriarchal assumptions that once black women were married the federal government would no longer need to provide support they often resorted to coercive measures to force men and women living together as husband and wife to legally marry. Nevertheless, black men and women continued to live together according to the customs of their life during slavery. These relationships were undoubtedly accepted by community standards. *Daily Post*, March 16, 1866, 4, 8. This evidence suggests former slaves were often divided on the practice of legal marriage.
49 Registers of Depositions of the Branches of the Freedman’s Saving and Trust Company.
50 Brown, “Negotiating and Transforming the Public Sphere”; Hunter, *To ’Joy My Freedom*.
51 Registers of Depositions of the Freedman’s Saving and Trust Company.
52 Registers of Depositions of the Freedman’s Saving and Trust Company. Most individuals provide their street addresses for the deposit slips. In some instances, when that information was not provided, individuals were located in one of the various post-Civil War city directories.
54 Registers of Depositions of the Branches of the Freedman’s Saving and Trust Company.
56 Robinson, “Plans Dat Comed from God.”
57 Registers of Depositions of the Branches of the Freedman’s Saving and Trust Company.
58 Registers of Depositions of the Branches of the Freedman’s Saving and Trust Company.
59 Boyle and Chapman and Company, *Directory of the City of Memphis for 1876*.
Registers of Depositions of the Branches of the Freedman’s Saving and Trust Company. My examination differs from Armstead L. Robinson who concluded that there were over 200 different organizations in Memphis. This number most likely represented the number of deposit black organizations made to the Freedman’s Bank. Robinson, “Plans Dat Comed from God.”

One of the best studies that examines the difference between black political leaders and the majority black working-classes remains Thomas C. Holt, Black Over White: Negro Political Leadership in South Carolina During Reconstruction (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1977). For a more recent study see Michael W. Fitzgerald, Urban Emancipation: Popular Politics in Reconstruction Mobile, 1860-1890 (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University, 2002).

Registers of Depositions of the Branches of the Freedman’s Saving and Trust Company. Most organizations were taken from the deposit slips of the Freedman’s Saving Bank. However, in a few cases, additional black organizations were located in city directories. See, for example, Boyle and Chapman and Company, Directory of the City of Memphis for 1876.

Brown, “Negotiating and Transformation the Public Sphere”; Higginbotham, Righteous Discontent; Hunter, To ’Joy My Freedom.

Angela M. Hornsby, argues, it is important to remember that black men “labored alongside black women to uplift the race and their sex through institution building.” Angela M. Hornsby, “Gender and Class in Post-Emancipation Black Communities,” in A Companion to African American History, ed. Alton Hornsby, Jr., (Malden, Massachusetts: Blackwell, 2005), 385.

My work is influenced by recent work on how personal relationships, rather than just class and gender, helped create alliances and divisions with the black community. See Kayne, Joining Places and Dylan C. Penningroth, Claims of Kinfolk.


Memphis Daily Appeal, July 6, 1867, 3.

Daily Post, July 6, 1869, 1.

Daily Appeal, July 5, 1866, 5.

Rawick, An American Slave.

Frederick Douglass, The Life and Writings of Frederick Douglass, vol. 2, Pre-Civil War Decade, 1850-1860 (New York, 1950), 189, 190.


White, “It was a Proud Day.”

Kaye, Joining Places, 38, 39.

Hugues, Thirty Years a Slave, 48.

Daily Appeal, January 2, 1866, 2.

Daily Post, January 2, 1867, 4.

Daily Avalanche, June 8, 1866, 4.

Daily Post, July 6, 1866.

Daily Post, July 5, 1867, 8. One of the best discussions of the centrality of the circle to African and African American culture remains Sterling Stuckey’s analysis of the “ring shout.” See Stuckey, Slave Culture, 10-17.

Stuckey, Slave Culture, 17-97.
The musical aspects of these celebrations were frequently noted in the local press. *Daily Post*, July 6, 1866; July 5, 1867, 8; July 3, 1868; Memphis *Daily Appeal*, July 5, 1872; July 5, 1874; July 6, 1875.

*Daily Post*, 6 July 1866, 8; July 1867, 8; July 6, 1869; *Daily Appeal*, July 5, 1872; July 6, 1875; July 6, 1877, 1.

*Daily Appeal*, July 5, 1872, 4.

*Daily Post*, July 3, 5, 6, 1866, 8; July 7, 1868, 4; *Daily Appeal*, July 5, 1874, 4.

*Daily Post*, July 3, 1868.

*Daily Appeal*, July 6, 1867, 3; July 6, 1875, 1; July 6, 1877, 1.

For the first decade after the Civil War references to parades were made in every year except 1870 and 1871. They often provided detailed information on the parade routes. See, for example, *Daily Post* July 3, 1868, 4 and July 2, 1869, 4.

*Daily Appeal*, July 6, 1875, 1.

*Daily Post*, July 5, 1867, 8.

*Daily Appeal*, July 6, 1875, 1.

*Daily Post*, July 7, 1868, 4; July 2, 1869, 4.

Ibid.

*Daily Post*, July 2, 1869, 4.

*Daily Post*, July 6, 1866, 8; *Daily Appeal*, July 5, 1872.

*Daily Post*, July 5, 1867, 8.

*Daily Post*, July 6, 1869, 4.


*Daily Post*, July 6, 1866, 8; July 5, 1867, 8; July 7, 1868; *Daily Appeal*, July 6, 1867, 3; July 5, 1872, 4.

*Daily Post*, July 5, 1867, 8.

*Daily Post*, July 2, 1867, 8; July 5, 1867, 8; *Daily Appeal*, July 4, 1867.


*Daily Appeal*, July 4, 1873, 4.

*Daily Appeal*, July 6, 1875, 1.

*Daily Post*, July 3, 1866.


Black Memphians struggled against both conservative Southerners and white Republicans over their proper place in the new social order. Elite Memphians, for example, refused to relinquish their exclusive right to the public sphere. They argued African Americans were ill-prepared to vote and their enfranchisement represented the continued break down of the social order. Similar to southern conservatives, white Republicans did not recognize former slaves as social or political equals. To most white Americans black southerners remained an inferior race in need of social and political guidance. Party leaders noted that while the vote symbolized future opportunities for “self improvement and elevation,” enfranchised black southerners were currently indebted to white Republicans and should “swear by him who made you men.” Relegated to a subservient role by white conservatives and white Republicans alike, political mobilization required the independent initiative of freed people.

In the months following African American enfranchisement in Tennessee, political events were widely attended by former slaves. In the spring of 1867, a Shelby County Republican convention held in Brownsville, Tennessee, just outside of Memphis, underscored the social significance former slaves attached to electoral politics. Former slaves from Memphis and the surrounding countryside gathered in
the city’s court house and in the streets to witness the nomination of candidates for the upcoming state election. The enthusiasm that accompanied political events demonstrated not only former slaves’ willingness to embrace their new public role, but also how they used politics to experience and express their freedom. In response to the arrival of a group of armed white Southerners, a crowd of freed people began chanting “Hurrah for Brownlow” and “Damn Jeff Davis.” No doubt, former slaves relished the reversal of fortunes that accompanied the defeat of the Confederacy and the placement of white Republicans such as Governor William Brown in control of political affairs. The symbolism of this public performance should not be overlooked, however. African Americans acted collectively and explicitly mocked white southerners’ authority. Expressing the true meaning of their political empowerment, they continued, “Hurrah for Brownlow” and “Damn All White Men.”

Former slaves’ enthusiasm towards the campaign to register new voters throughout the summer of 1867 demonstrated the wide appeal of popular politics. And, because the battle for power between white Southerners and former slaves took place on a very public stage confrontations such as this one occurred often and have been examined by historians. Yet, despite historical interests the trajectory and impact of black enfranchisement more still needs to be learned about the public lives of actual voters and how they were able to sustain grass-roots political movements throughout the American South. This chapter examines the campaign to register new voters in Memphis, Tennessee in order to demonstrate how a seemingly dispersed population of former slaves was able to translate their excitement for politics into
electoral participation. An examination of public events and election records reveals that collective political action in Memphis stemmed from voters associational ties to autonomous social networks and sense of belonging in their new urban environment. As a result, former slaves were able to use the vote to solidify their place in the local community separate from white Southerners.

In urban areas across the South African Americans began political organizing during the Civil War. This was especially true in cities occupied by the Union Army such as Nashville and Memphis. As early as 1863, African Americans in Memphis and Nashville organized parades and public gatherings demanding the right to vote. And, in 1864, Morris Henderson, a former slave and the pastor of the Beale Street Baptist Church, and Horatio Rankin, a free black missionary, attended the National Colored Convention in Syracuse, New York, where Frederick Douglass expressed confidence that citizenship rights for all black Americans were to accompany the demise of slavery. Yet, despite the implications of the convention to national understandings of citizenship, black Southerner demands for political and civil rights manifested local concerns. In Memphis, throughout the Civil War, African American soldiers and formerly enslaved men and women had engaged in multiple confrontations with white residents and northern officials over access to public space and the right to self-determination. Because the Emancipation Proclamation did not apply to the state of Tennessee the status of former slaves remained unclear and their freedom subject to coercion. African Americans had been reminded daily of their
continued subjugation by the constant efforts by white southerners and northerners to limit their movements and economic opportunities.\textsuperscript{10} For countless black migrants in Memphis, therefore, the struggle for the right to vote was inextricably linked to urban initiatives to reconstitute familial relations, build autonomous communities, and gain access to the public sphere.

In the last months of the war these shared experiences became a matter of public debate once state governments began considering policies for political Reconstruction. African Americans in Nashville petitioned a Union Convention of white Tennesseans to consider granting black men the right to vote.\textsuperscript{11} Similarly, in Memphis, during the spring of 1865, a petition to the Tennessee General Assembly demanding civil and political rights circulated throughout the black communities. Petitioners noted not only their common history in slavery, but also their desire to be recognized as citizens. They repudiated the laws and statutes of slavery that remained in place limiting their ability to gain control over their lives, while demanding an expansion of their civil rights to include their right to marriage, the privilege of education, and the right to own property and equal protection before the law.\textsuperscript{12} These demands represented what Eric Foner and others refer to as the “politicization of everyday life” that accompanied the transition from slavery to freedom throughout the American South. By making private matters a subject of public discussion, African Americans gained not only public recognition of their complaints, but established political personas as independent, self-actualizing individuals.\textsuperscript{13} To legitimize their right to the public sphere African Americans realized early on that freedom must be
accompanied by political rights. Petitioners asserted that “to confirm and protect these liberties we ask for the exercise of the right of suffrage.”

Early organizational efforts depended on the participation and leadership of black soldiers. For thousands of African American migrants in the Mid-South service in the Union Army served as a basis for their political education. Bobby Lovett estimates that between May 1863 and the end of the Civil War “the Union Army at Memphis recruited and organized some 6,967 African American men into seven infantry regiments, three heavy artillery regiments, and two batteries of light artillery.” Often used for fatigue duty black soldiers had to prove to white northerners their abilities as soldiers. African American soldiers resented being used solely for hard labor. Therefore, when they did engage in combat they fought not only against white Southerners on the battlefield, but also against racial prejudices. In Memphis, Black soldiers were used not only for service in the defense of the city at Fort Pickering, but also engaged in armed confrontations with Confederate soldiers in northern Mississippi and West Tennessee. This included the battle in defense of Fort Pillow, where a raid by General Nathan B. Forrest resulted in a massacre of black troops after they surrendered. In each case, these confrontations strengthened the solidarity among black soldiers and the political awareness of their role in the collective struggle for black freedom. “Remember Fort Pillow!” became a rallying cry for black soldiers in Memphis, an indication of not only their military valor, but also their defiance of white Southerners and the continued subordination of freed people. As a result of their willingness to fight for the end of slavery, Lovett estimates black
soldiers in West Tennessee suffered 2,242 causalities fighting against Forrest’s
guerilla band of Confederate soldiers and were “partly responsible for some 2,234
causalities inflicted upon Confederate forces.”

Their experiences in the war facilitated political mobilization in Memphis.
Similar to soldiers throughout the South, they challenged the Union Army’s
discriminatory practices, became conversant in federal policies, and embraced
opportunities military service provided to receive an education. More importantly,
black soldiers were a symbol of African Americans collective struggle for freedom.
African American soldiers called upon all black men to cease using the phrase,
‘nigger,’ they provided clothing and aid to migrant communities, and policed
community gatherings to ensure black freedoms were protected. Their daily battles
to protect former slaves helped lay the foundations for political organizing based upon
a mutual interest in claiming independence for themselves and the larger wartime
community. And their service provided their justification for political rights. It is not
clear who was responsible for the petition to the Tennessee General Assembly
demanding civil and political rights, however, black soldiers most likely contributed to
its inception. African Americans in Memphis proclaimed their rights based upon the
status of former slaves as soldiers in the Union Army. And, soldiers probably played
a central role in its circulation throughout the community.

African American soldiers’ collective grievances became the basis for political
activism. On May 24, 1865, former slaves in Memphis held a parade and community-
wide gathering to protest their exclusion from the public sphere. A procession of men,
women, and children headed by “a martial band from one of the colored regiments” and “a few hundred soldiers” marched throughout the principle city streets. Throughout this demonstration former slaves were able to share stories about their wartime experiences, strengthen social ties, and expand their political awareness about themselves in relation to the larger society. They gathered in front of a stand decorated with a large American flag and a picture of Abraham Lincoln. To many these decorations symbolized their emancipation, their service in the military, and their desire to be recognized as American citizens. The celebratory fervor that accompanied this gathering, however, suggests the tenor of the meeting was that of defiance. At the conclusion of the meeting participants joined together to sing “John Brown’s Body.” This song was often sung among black soldiers during the war and its political meaning would not have been lost on the migrant community or white Southerners. Sung to the tune of the “Battle Hymn Republic” the song celebrated the martyrdom of John Brown for his attempt to lead a slave rebellion at Harper’s Ferry, Virginia. The song continues by mocking the Confederate cause as participants joined in with the refrain “Hang Jeff Davis on a Sour Apple Tree.” Learned orally, the song represented a discourse shared among former slaves during the war that expressed their collective desire for freedom. After the war, the song represented not only former slaves’ jubilation over the demise of slavery, but also black Americans continuing struggle for independence. By joining together in unison, former slaves expressed a common understanding of history and a political vision designed to assert their autonomy. “Glory Hallelujah,” the song continued, “we are marching on.”
More than just the experiences of black soldiers, former slaves made public common struggles rooted in their daily lives in these wartime demonstrations.\textsuperscript{23} In the procession, participants carried banners proclaiming “Liberty, Education, and the Right of Free Suffrage” and “Willing to Work.”\textsuperscript{24} Throughout the Civil War, northern officials struggled to enforce federal policies that limited migrants’ opportunities to make a free wage and at the wars conclusion officials began arresting former slaves on the charge of vagrancy and forcing them to return to work on rural plantations in the Mississippi River Valley.\textsuperscript{25} More than likely, African American proclamations that they were “willing to work” did not represent a willingness to return to work on southern plantations, but rather indicated their desire to receive the benefits of their labor as part of the urban working-class. Former slaves undoubtedly understood their rights as free laborers as essential to their economic survival, as well as their ability to gain access to property and establish autonomous communities. As a result, when they paraded through the downtown business district former slaves found common ground in their desire to express their freedom in the public sphere.

Thus, these wartime gatherings were representative of the emerging urban black community. Their daily battles to claim independence during the war created a political consciousness based upon their mutual interests in establishing a sense of belonging in their new surroundings. Public meetings during the war and immediately afterwards were held with increasing frequency. The presence of African Americans soldiers revealed not only their active role in the political mobilization of the black community, but demonstrated that former slaves were being to carve out their own
place separate from white Southerners. Black soldiers also belonged to a number of
the city’s mutual aid and benevolent societies created during the Civil War era. 26
These associations were taking a much more active role in public life and helped
facilitate early organizational efforts. At a memorial procession in honor of President
Abraham Lincoln, the Memphis Daily Bulletin observed, it was well attended by
African American regiments and the Sons of Ham, an organization growing rapidly,
and “a large society of colored people known as the Social Benevolent Society.” 27
And throughout the summer of 1865, African American mutual aid societies gathered
to celebrate the anniversary of federal occupation and West Indies emancipation. 28
African Americans embraced popular politics outside formal parties and instead relied
on their associational ties within their communities to build and sustain a grass-roots
political movement.

Despite the political initiatives of African Americans throughout the American
South, the new state governments established after the war refused to extend civil or
political rights to former slaves. In Tennessee, even though the military government
under the leadership of Andrew Johnson abolished slavery, the state refused to
consider African American demands for suffrage. 29 In Memphis, white ex-
Confederates were even more hostile to black citizenship rights. On May 1, 1865, an
estimated crowd of 1,000 of the city’s “Old Citizens” met at Court Square. During the
meeting, those in attendance agreed to repudiate secession and support the Union.
They, however, refused to support Emancipation. 30 By gathering in such a prominent
urban setting, white Southerners reiterated their exclusive rights to the public sphere. They considered black enfranchisement even more of a threat to the social order. Conservatives argued African Americans were ill-prepared to vote and their enfranchisement would lead to social chaos. No longer held in slavery, political battle lines were redrawn. African American agency was seen not just as an affront to slaveholder’s authority, but rather the entire community. As a result, in the years that followed, the struggle over the right to exercise the vote took place on a very public stage.

Conservative elites interpreted political developments in the post-Civil War era as a challenge to their social and political authority. Already disenfranchised, the introduction of a more restrictive franchise law to the Tennessee General Assembly in January of 1866 promised to move white Memphians further to the political margins. In response, several conservative members of the state legislature resigned from their office, including the two representatives from Memphis. To reaffirm their dominance over local matters white conservatives worked to ensure their reelection in the upcoming political contest in the spring. White Memphians organized Johnson clubs to mobilize conservative support. In February, Southern conservatives celebrated Andrew Johnson’s vetoes of the Freedmen’s Bureau and Civil Rights Bills. Johnson’s defense of the veto undoubtedly resonated with the concerns of elite Memphians. Not only did the Freedmen’s Bureau, Johnson argued, encourage black southerners not to work, but the Civil Rights Bill threatened the social order by operating “in favor of the colored and against the white race.” He also questioned
former slaves’ aptitude for citizenship rights because of their perceived ignorance of republicanism.\(^{34}\) By doing so, President Johnson affirmed the sole social and political dominance of white men. As a result, elite Memphians formed Johnson clubs to “give aid and active support to Andrew Johnson” and reframed this national debate to meet local concerns.\(^{35}\) They viewed the election of conservative legislatures back to the Tennessee State General Assembly as a repudiation of the Freedmen’s Bureau, which the conservative press noted, “would enslave white people.”\(^{36}\) Throughout the political campaign more white Memphians joined the city’s Johnson clubs, and conservatives were able to easily reelect their candidates back to office. Conservatives considered the election as an “endorsement of President Johnson” and a “rebuke to the Radicals.”\(^{37}\)

The actions of elite Memphians, however, demonstrated their elusive claims to social and political dominance. Conservative Memphians petitioned the national government and organized public meetings in order to reclaim their authority. This movement included the active participation of former Confederate soldiers. In May of 1866, for example, thirteen former Confederate officers petitioned the President to guarantee a republican form of government. Written in response to their disenfranchisement, white Conservatives protested the control of local and state affairs placed into the hands of a perceived minority.\(^{38}\) More likely, assertions of republicanism indicated a belief that public power belonged in the hands of property holding white men.\(^{39}\) The social turmoil that accompanied the Civil War threatened to elevate the political status of not only African Americans, but also the working-
classes. Conservatives defended the antebellum social order. At a political gathering of Johnson Club supporters that summer, members asserted, “this is a government for white men” and rejected black suffrage.\(^40\) This was followed by mass demonstrations. Later that summer, over 5,000 conservatives gathered to protest against a Republican legislature that continued to exclude them from the political arena.\(^41\) And, in mid-September, an estimated crowd of 1,200 to 1,600 former Confederate soldiers gathered in Court Square to support Andrew Johnson and attack the Tennessee state Republican governor William G. Brownlow. General Nathan Bedford Forrest, the general in charge of the attack on Fort Pillow and leader of several raids on Union forces in Memphis during the Civil War, along with several other former Confederate officers, organized this demonstration.\(^42\) Reacting to the defeat of the Confederacy and their political marginalization, the democratization of the American South represented a direct challenge to the stability and preservation of a way of life predicated on the political dominance of the elite.

Conservatives approached local elections in defense of the antebellum social order. In October of 1866, Memphis held its first city election since the Civil War. Conservatives viewed this election as an opportunity to reclaim authority back from the city’s working-class and middle-class immigrant population that took advantage of the absence of elite Memphians during the Civil War and their disenfranchisement to take control of public offices.\(^43\) Elite Memphians blamed this population for contributing to the social disorder and violence that transpired during the Memphis Massacre. The result of the franchise law in Tennessee was the removal of property-
holders from power, conservatives argued, and place it in “the hands of and under the control, to a great extent, of the more inferior classes of society, which often results in the selection of officers of little qualifications and distasteful to a large majority of the people whose interest is directly affected thereby, and prejudicial to the prosperity, peace, order, and security of society.”

Current public officials were characterized as “drunken” and “corrupt” during the election. Similar to former slaves, elite Memphians considered this property-less class incapable of self-government and a threat to the social order. Conservatives were easily able to elect their candidates to office. Even though the Republican Party had little impact on the outcome of these elections, the Memphis Daily Post conceded, the mayor and the council were “good businessmen and moderate conservatives.” The defeat of the past administration represented a victory for local conservatives and a validation of their belief that political authority belonged only to elite, conservative white men.

The election also demonstrated the limited influence of the local Republican Party. Unlike East Tennessee were Union support was strong; throughout West Tennessee few white Southerners supported the Republican Party. Retired major general Carl Schurz commented after touring the South that there was “no national feeling” in the region. For most white Memphians this contributed to their repudiation of the Republican Party. As a result, only 101 Republicans voted in the election for the state legislature. Political leaders noted this made a more stringent restrictive franchise necessary in order to ensure the survival of the local Republican Party. Barbour Lewis, head of the Shelby County Republican Party, observed,
Tennessee needed the restrictive franchise to “keep the country’s enemy from power.” Reconstruction policies had a tremendous impact on who exercised public authority on a local level. Prior to the enfranchisement of former slaves, however, the Republican Party in Memphis exercised a minimal impact on local matters.

Similar to elite Memphians, white Republicans did not recognize former slaves as social or political equals. William G. Brownlow, the Republican governor of Tennessee, for example, favored the removal of former slaves to land set aside by Congress. And Memphis Republicans rejected the idea of African American enfranchisement. At Republican meetings political leaders repeatedly denounced black suffrage. By doing so, Republicans undoubtedly hoped to gain support among white Southerners. Although their refusal to recognize African Americans as political actors also indicated their belief that former slaves did not have an equal claim to public autonomy. To most white Americans black southerners remained an inferior race in need of social and political guidance. More importantly, because political rights were still considered a privilege based upon one’s social and economic status former slaves were considered incapable of self-governance. As a consequence of this ideology, former slaves struggled against both white conservatives and local Republicans for political space and independence.

In response to their continued marginalization, African Americans appealed directly to the state government for political rights. Because black southerners were excluded from the local political culture and denied the right to vote they placed greater emphasis on the actions of the state legislature. Throughout the summer of
1866, African Americans prepared for a State Convention of Colored Citizens meeting at the St. Jones African Methodist Episcopal Church in Nashville.\(^{51}\) Built upon the wartime mobilization of former slaves, this convention followed the freedmen conventions organized throughout the South the previous year. These conventions were designed to protest African Americans’ continued exclusion from the political arena.\(^{52}\) Here over one hundred delegates from across the state met and shared their grievances and demanded the right to vote.\(^{53}\) Gatherings such as this one represented a political consciousness among black southerners that transcended region. The end of the Civil War was accompanied by political agitation throughout the South. And, the success of these conventions demonstrated the organizational abilities of black communities throughout the state.\(^{54}\)

Grass-roots mobilization depended on the mass appeal of popular politics. In preparation for the upcoming convention, African Americans mobilized to appoint delegates to represent Memphis. Members of the Sons of Ham played an early organizational role in black politics. The mutual aid society was founded before the Civil War and reflected a leadership structure rooted in the antebellum black community. The leaders of this association consisted primarily of carpenters, porters, and upholsters, though officers were not solely limited to the economic elite. There were two accounts of unskilled working-class African Americans attaining a leadership position within the Sons of Ham. In July they met at Colwell’s Hall for the purpose of choosing delegates for the Nashville Colored Convention. In attendance were some of the most economically established members of the post-Civil War black
Joseph Colwell, a long-time resident of Memphis, purchased his freedom in 1843 and was considered one of the “wealthiest” African Americans in the city. There were also two barbers, one porter, and one pastor, and three carpenters present at the meeting. These individuals, Steven Hahn argues, had “the greatest opportunities to gain oratorical skills and some knowledge of parliamentary rules.”

Unlike other urban communities, however, the antebellum free and slave population was small and lacked the institutional foundation to dictate popular politics. As a result, while the Sons of Ham remained influential throughout the post-Civil War era, political leaders who could appeal more directly to the cultural traditions and political struggles of the migrant communities were more often chosen to represent Memphis.

On August 1, 1866, African Americans held a political gathering to elect delegates for the community at-large. Unlike the meeting held by the Sons of Ham, this gathering was public and attended by the black migrant population. An estimated crowd of over two thousands African Americans joined together to celebrate their emancipation and demand their inclusion in the political arena. Similar to other freedom commemorations, black Memphians participated in a parade, danced together, and staked claim to their new urban environment as free people. By holding the gathering on West Indies Emancipation Day African Americans connected their current political struggle to a common history rooted in slavery and the collective struggle for freedom. This social activity, therefore, centered political agitation firmly within the cultural traditions and experiences of former slaves.
Migrants participated in a city-wide vote to choose their representatives for the State Colored Convention in Nashville. The local newspaper estimated that over two thousand votes were cast.\textsuperscript{60} Contrary to white opinion, former slaves had a long history of self-governance. Not unlike pre-colonial Africa societies, slaves reached decisions through discussion and informal consensus among kinship groups, age-sets, and other sodalities. Leaders were often chosen based on their ability to appeal to the consensual and ethical concerns of the slave community. These democratic values remained in place after slavery. Unfortunately, no evidence exists to indicate how this election was organized. Most likely, representatives were chosen only after they spoke in public, allowing former slaves the opportunity to deliberate with each other and decide on who best represented the concerns of their communities. The public nature of this gathering meant more than likely their votes were not carried out privately suggesting collaboration and consensus played an influential role in the decision making process.\textsuperscript{61}

Black Memphians chose five individuals to represent them in Nashville. The majority were free before the war and would go on to be prominent political leaders in Memphis; however, their legitimacy derived from their support among former slaves. Only two members of the Sons of Ham, Joseph Colwell and Ed Merriweather, were elected as delegates. The other three developed a reputation for speaking out against black subordination and the exclusion of African Americans from the public sphere.\textsuperscript{62} While free before the war, they were less dependent on the white population for support. Ed Shaw, a free black born in Kentucky, moved to Memphis just before the
war and became the owner and operator of a saloon. Hannibal Carter, a free black from New Orleans, was the only delegate to serve in the Union Army. Carter served in the Louisiana Native Guard, one of the first African American military units to fight in the Civil War, before he moved to Memphis during the war. He also operated a saloon. Both were relative newcomers to the city and operated business establishments that catered to the black migrant population. Rufus McCain, the other delegate, was also a new resident in Memphis. Born in West Tennessee, he lived in Pine Bluff, Arkansas, for six years before arriving in Memphis. While McCain did not serve in the Union Army, he was a member of Negro militia organized by the Union to defend Memphis from Confederate forces during the war. Only twenty-four years old at the time, McCain owned several drays and belonged to Avery Chapel. His work as a drayman placed him in daily contact with the larger community as he traversed the city from one neighborhood to another. His church membership also placed him in contact with former soldiers, northern missionaries, other entrepreneurs, and the black working-class. Thus, while free before the war, Shaw, Carter, and McCain’s positions as newcomers, their military service, and entrepreneurial status made them more likely to contest white domination and control, a characteristic that resonated with black communal desires for self-determination.\textsuperscript{63}

Even though they were free, former slaves’ right to access the public sphere remained contested. As a result, community gatherings frequently turned into political rallies. Members of Avery Chapel, for example, organized an emancipation celebration for January 1, 1867, for the explicit purpose of demanding the right to
Founded by Horatio Rankin, a free black missionary, during the Civil War this African Methodist Episcopal church’s membership represented the diverse population of Memphis. Its members included long-term residents, antebellum free blacks, and leading figures of the emerging black middle class. Working-class migrants from the southern interior also attended this church. After the Civil War, the church became a center for political activity. Organizers of the upcoming emancipation celebration expressed former slaves’ universal desire for freedom and recognition as social and political equals. They claimed, “the right to vote, fellow citizens, is as dear to us as any class of the body politic.” More than just symbolic, organizers demanded a voice in overseeing the making of laws that governed their daily lives. By making these claims, African Americans expressed a common belief that independence required access to political power in order to guarantee former slaves right to self-determination.

The political efficacy of this social movement derived from the organizational support of the developing black neighborhoods. By holding these political demonstrations in conjunction with freedom celebrations, black Memphians rooted political activism firmly within local communities. On emancipation day, long-term residents and migrants joined together to celebrate freedom, establish bonds of fellowship, and legitimize their public identity as free people. The social activities that took place created a political culture based on common experiences and a desire for local autonomy. Similar to most post-Civil War freedom commemorations, this celebration was accompanied by a parade and social gathering. Led by the Sons of
Ham, the success of this demonstration came from the participation of the numerous mutual aid and benevolent societies already in place. The Social Benevolent Society and other “Christian” benevolent societies, the Memphis Daily Post reported, actively participated.\(^67\) To most African American migrants these celebrations were primarily social gatherings providing an opportunity to strengthen friendships and build camaraderie amongst neighbors. However, because former slaves’ collective struggle for freedom rarely separated efforts to control their private lives from their contests to gain access to the public sphere, the social meaning of these gatherings were inherently political. These gatherings demonstrated the reciprocal relationship between community attachment and political participation that influenced the trajectory of black politics throughout the post-Civil War era.

Reconstruction policies radically changed who had access to the public sphere. Tennessee reentered the Union in July of 1866 and ratified the fourteenth amendment. Local power was restored to Memphis in October of that year, however, conservative political gains made the future of the Republican Party unclear. Even with the majority of ex-Confederates disenfranchised, white Republicans remained unable to control political debate. Partly in response to the weakness of the Republican Party in West Tennessee, on February 26, 1867, Governor William G. Brownlow signed a bill extending voting privileges to African American men.\(^68\) As a result, black enfranchisement generated a contest over who had the right to exercise public power. The active participation of former slaves in the political process, however,
successfully remade the local political culture independently of the Republican Party. By relying upon the strength of their own social networks, freed people transformed their collective activities into effective political strategies that enabled them to exhibit public power and solidify their place in Memphis.

White Republicans responded immediately to black enfranchisement by appealing to African Americans in Memphis and Shelby County for political support. Most often they based their appeals on the role of Republicans as liberators in contrast to conservatives Southerners who were cast as African Americans violent oppressors. Speaking at an African American political gathering, Barbour Lewis, the Chairman of the Shelby County Republican Party, claimed, conservatives were represented by “men of the Avalanche school,” the conservative newspaper blamed by Republicans for encouraging the violence against former slaves that took place during the Memphis Massacre. Lewis maintained these white southerners remained “bitter and malignant today” and continued to “stir up evil passions” against former slaves. Reference to these local contests over the right to black self-determination would have undoubtedly appealed to many of the former slaves in attendance. He continued by attacking the social foundations of the political organization of Memphis conservatives in Johnson clubs. Andrew Johnson, Lewis proclaimed, not only betrayed the government, but also former slaves, “after having sworn to be true and faithful to you, and to be your Moses.” Instead, Johnson had been playing “Moses to the rebels ever since he became President.”

...
to support the expansion of civil and political rights to black southerners, but also linked these national issues to community politics and battles over local authority.

Black southerners were not accepted as political equals. Because many Republican leaders only gradually came to support black enfranchisement in order to ensure their party’s survival the relationship between African Americans and the party remained tenuous. African Americans were still not allowed to hold office or serve on juries. Instead, Republicans believed former slaves required guidance on their appropriate responsibilities as free people. Lewis noted the vote symbolized opportunities for “self-improvement and elevation” that awaited former slaves. White Republicans placed themselves in a supervisory role over black southerners’ entry into the political arena. If anything, they considered black southerners indebted to their party. As a result, Lewis explained, African Americans should support his party out of gratitude. Lewis encouraged black Memphians to “swear by him who made you men.” Undoubtedly this statement was made in reference to Abraham Lincoln’s role in emancipating the slaves. Rarely did local Republicans attribute any form of independent agency to freed people. Yet, despite being relegated to a secondary role by party leaders, African Americans created an opening within the Republican Party to express their collective autonomy.

In anticipation of the registration of black voters, many of the same individuals who agitated for civil and political rights took an active leadership role in the mobilization of African Americans. They were either free before the war, well known or established, and somewhat educated. At a community meeting held at Avery
Chapel commemorating African American enfranchisement organizers celebrated their right to be recognized as political equals and began a concerted effort to register new voters. Those in attendance included Joseph Colwell, Joseph Clouston, and Frank Talley, all prosperous members of the antebellum free black community. In addition, Edward Shaw and Hannibal Carter, representatives for black Memphians at the State Colored Convention in Nashville, participated. Given Avery Chapel’s historical origins in the Union Army’s military camps in Memphis, a number of those in attendance were most likely former soldiers who remained in Memphis after their discharge. Others present included representatives from the new professional and entrepreneurial urban working-class. An identification of the occupations of 21 out of 72 known participants reveals the inclusion of the following: six clergymen, one doctor, and three barbers, along with three porters, three carpenters, one drayman, and one grocer, one shoemaker, one whitewasher, and one river worker. These individuals gave speeches, drafted resolutions, and rallied community support. They were politically informed and their social and economic connections helped them spread news about local and state developments by word of mouth to the larger community.

More so than an individuals’ free-born or occupational status, the organizational success of these early political efforts derived from the inclusion of a broad spectrum of the population. The majority of known participants in attendance were not listed in either census records or city directories suggesting their newcomer or working-class status. Certainly these individuals included day laborers and
migrants from the surrounding Mid-South plantations. The visible participation of African American religious leaders suggests political activism had wide appeal among the neighborhood congregations. Throughout the South religious leaders played an active role in the mobilization of black communities. Their participation reflected a political vision that rarely separated the sacred world from secular affairs. Religious instruction often incorporated a political message that challenged the antebellum social order by promising the eventual liberation of African Americans from slavery. After the Civil War, churches, therefore, not only provide autonomous social places to hold political gatherings, but also tied black politics to the social aspirations of former slaves. Page Tyler, a former slave and pastor of the African Methodist Episcopal Avery Chapel, and Morris Henderson, a former slave and pastor of Beale Street Baptist Church, along with members of their congregation were among the known participants at this political rally. While Beale Street Baptist Church had a larger working-class migrant congregation, both churches were widely attended by former slaves. Not only could pastors use their influence to encourage freed people to register to vote, but churches were neighborhood centers where news about upcoming meetings were shared and information about political events were discussed among members. By approaching suffrage as a social responsibility for the entire black community these rallies undoubtedly helped incorporate friends and neighbors into the political process.

The participation of various neighborhood associations further demonstrated the importance former slaves’ civic involvement played in fostering political activism.
Appointed leaders of the city’s mutual aid and benevolent societies attended the rally. Leaders from the Sons of Ham, for example, were well accounted for at the meeting. Many of the members of this society belonged to Avery Chapel and continued to take an active role in local politics. Other associations were also represented. Members of the Social Benevolent Society participated. The Social Benevolent Societies were one of the largest black associations in Memphis with satellite branches in black neighborhoods dispersed throughout the city. Its leaders included draymen, hack drivers, porters, and whitewashers and other members of the urban entrepreneurial and working-class. Evidence suggests representatives from the Sons and Daughters of Zion attended as well.73 Associated with the city’s black Baptist congregations, this mutual aid society represented one of the largest working-class organizations of black migrants in Memphis. Their working lives and community involvement placed them in daily contact with friends, neighbors, and former slaves throughout the city. These social networks, therefore, provided an institutional based for the mobilization of former slaves. More than just training grounds for political participation, these associations represented the collective interests of black Memphians and extended social legitimacy to early political mobilization efforts.

Black republican political rhetoric drew upon former slaves’ enthusiasm to be independent from white Southerners to mobilize potential voters. Political leaders expressed their belief that continued political agitation was needed in order to secure their place in the new social order. During the gathering, Horatio Rankin noted that “tonight we can rejoice not only as freemen but as citizens of Tennessee and of the
great American republic.” He concluded by linking suffrage to African Americans’ collective struggle for freedom. “We are marching on,” Rankin charged, echoing the famous refrain from the chorus of “John Brown’s Body,” sung by black soldiers during the Civil War. His incorporation of words from this famous song undoubtedly appealed to the former black soldiers in attendance, who viewed their military service as part of a larger movement to establish the right to black self-determination. By employing this popular discourse, Rankin implicitly expressed a repudiation of white domination and control. And, while a few white Republicans were in attendance to show their support, from the beginning the political enthusiasm of African Americans originated separate from party operatives.

Black Memphians considered their struggle for freedom incomplete until they received full recognition as autonomous individuals. It had been less than a year since the violence that transpired during the Memphis Massacre destroyed the social and cultural institutions of the emerging black community. Despite appeals by the members of Avery Chapel for financial support, the local community and national agencies remained unwilling to recognize their grievances and compensate them for their losses. And although enfranchised, African American were denied the right to hold office in the state of Tennessee. African Americans, therefore, identified politics a medium to express their collective autonomy. Community leaders forged a resolution that embodied African Americans shared history in slavery, local circumstances, and the need for continued political activism. Only “partially endowed with our rights as men,” participants argued, they resolved to “exercise the limited
privilege granted us to impress all” with a sense of “the injustice of denying our people, as a class, the enjoyment of unrestricted political freedom and citizenship.”

This rights-based political activism represented the early stages of community politics as African Americans worked to establish their place in the new social order. And it affirmed the need for collective action to realize black independence. Black Memphians claimed, “that our action as voters shall but continually reiterate our demand for equality before the law and in the law.”

Similar to African Americans throughout the South, to borrow the words of Elsa Barkley Brown, the vote was viewed as a “collective; not an individual possession.” At this political meeting “a large number” of black women were present and, while no information exists relaying what role they played at this organization meeting, it seems reasonable to suggest African American women participated in the political discussions that took place during this organizational meeting. The resolution’s emphasis on manhood demonstrates how gender was employed to contest white men’s exclusive claim to public authority and assert African Americans collective autonomy as well. When community leaders proclaimed their desire “to impress all with a sense of our manhood” their appeals certainly resonated with the city’s formerly enslaved migrant population. Throughout slavery African Americans were denied the freedom of autonomous relationships, the right to raise their own children, and the exclusive claim to oversee family and community affairs. Declarations of manhood reiterated black Memphians belief that independence required public power. This made politics a physically
contested terrain as black and white men fought over the right to claim local authority. However, the multiple meanings of manhood can not be discounted. For the “large number” of black women who attended this early political rally and demonstrations to follow declarations of manhood did not necessarily imply a universal acceptance of patriarchal standards. African American women remained active in the public sphere. Rather, political appeals to manhood were interpreted collectively to reflect African Americans shared criticism of the antebellum social order.

The popular appeal of this political rhetoric was frequently on display at the political gatherings and organization meetings widely attended by former slaves in the months following their enfranchisement. At a Shelby County Republican convention held in Brownsville just outside of Memphis, for instance, a group of white Republicans and “an exceedingly larger crowd of freemen” gathered to nominate candidates for the upcoming state election. African Americans from Memphis and the surrounding countryside gathered in the city’s court house and in the streets for this nomination convention. Their public presence demonstrated not only their desire to enter the political arena, but also represented an open critique of the denial of their right to self-determination when slaves. African American political leaders’ willingness to articulate these criticisms found a receptive audience. In Hannibal Carter’s speech to those in attendance he noted that “in times of slavery our wives and daughters were sold as hogs, sheep, or cattle,” and proclaimed, “that Rape after rape was committed upon them and that men who would do this ought to have their hearts cut out of them.” To the crowd of former slaves in attendance Carter’s speech
emphasized the unwillingness of African Americans to separate their hostility against white Southerners from the political process.\textsuperscript{79}

African Americans often expressed their desire for independence in the physical confrontations that took place at these political gatherings. In response to defiant speeches made by Carter and other black political leaders, armed whites gathered outside the convention with the intent on forcing them to recant. Former slaves, however, confronted their actions by openly resisting. During the incident, a crowd of freed people began chanting “Hurrah for Brownlow” and “Damn Jeff Davis.” No doubt, former slaves relished in the reversal of fortunes that accompanied the defeat of the Confederacy and the elevation of Republicans to political control. The symbolism of this public performance should not be overlooked. African Americans joined together in unison and explicitly mocked white southerners’ authority. After whites responded in kind with the opposite, black Republicans expressed the true meaning of their political empowerment. “Hurrah for Brownlow” and “Damn All White Men,” they continued. A gun battle ensued in which both black and white southerners drew their guns and exchanged fire.\textsuperscript{80} The incident demonstrated that for the thousands of ex-slaves who entered the political process they found common ground in their criticism of white domination and control. The collective nature of these demonstrations helped tie local political activism to the concerns of former slaves and their desire for self-determination.

Neighborhood associations played a central role in forging this enthusiasm into a political reality. Mutual Aid and Benevolent societies led the campaign to register
voters. In May, the Sons of Ham, the Colored Mechanics Society, and the Social Benevolent Society held a picnic in order to mobilize potential black voters for the upcoming state election that summer. This group of politically aware social activists already had experience in organizing social events; however success depended on the ability to turn popular politics into electoral participation. This diverse group of long-term residents, former slaves, and members of the entrepreneurial working-class attempted to meld their sense of civic responsibility with black community desires for self-determination into a political movement. A procession throughout the downtown business district began this demonstration with participants singing their political anthem “John Brown’s Body.” And those in attendance were encouraged to take an active role in encouraging black men to register. Speaking to the gathering, Hannibal Carter called upon them “to see that every colored man is registered, and that when he goes to the polls he casts his vote for Brownlow and the Radical Ticket.”  

Social events frequently turned into political rallies. In June, former slaves held a city-wide picnic for neighborhood schools. The press estimated that between 3,000 to 4,000 individuals attended this event. The large crowds in attendance reflected the importance former slaves placed on education. Many undoubtedly attended for the socialization that took place during these post-Civil War gatherings; others enthusiasm derived from the expression of their collective autonomy. The six local schools participating at this gathering were a product of former slaves’ cooperative endeavors. Not only was Avery chapel’s high school represented, but so too was the school for Beale Street Baptist Church. Members of these congregations
belonged to the same mutual aid and benevolent associations and interacted with each other on a daily basis either at home, at church, or at work. Therefore, freed people arrived not just as individuals, but as members of social networks already taking shape. These overlapping civic identities helped strengthen the foundation of their community consciousness by rooting it in social activism. Banners on display at this gathering emphasized the political implications of African American educational initiatives. “Onward and Upward-Never Say Fail,” and “Take no Step Backward,” expressed a common belief that literacy was essential to the collective struggle for social and economic advancement. The political exuberance on display at this gathering demonstrated a willingness to connect community initiatives to political involvement. 

Largely an illiterate former slave population, grass-roots political mobilization depended on these public gatherings to reach a wide audience and provide political instruction. Crowds of migrants listened attentively to political speeches. While some white Republicans spoke at this rally, speeches by black political leaders monopolized public ceremonies. These leaders were known for their oratorical skills and ability to express the sentiments of ex-slaves. Unlike white Republicans who emphasized former slaves’ indebtedness to the party, black politicians emphasized the importance of independence and local self-governance. “The day” was at hand, John Harris, a former slave, proclaimed, “when you shall stand up and declare who shall make the laws for you to live under.” The speeches were designed to make the audience aware of their political rights and to encourage them to support the Republican Party. In
preparation for the upcoming state election, registered voters were directed to go to the polls with “a certificate of registration in the left hand and a ticket with Brownlow in the right.” These instructions intended to minimize complications on Election Day and ensure all black votes were counted. It also meant to solidify local support behind the Republican Party. Black Memphians responded enthusiastically. Throughout the demonstration, cheers of “Brownlow, Brownlow,” accompanied the speeches made by political leaders. The participatory nature of the registration campaign reinforced party loyalty and incorporated neighborhoods into the political process by connecting registration to local communities.

Regardless of whether they lived in rural or urban areas, freed people responded to their enfranchisement with a sense of urgency. In the month of May alone, 4,562 African Americans from Shelby County registered to vote in Memphis. This emphatic response to black enfranchisement emerged in other areas throughout the region. In Jackson, Tennessee, for example, federal officials noted “large numbers have obtained their certification to vote and they still continue to register.” And, while registration often proceeded in secrecy, the collective importance former slaves placed upon enfranchisement made political participation a public activity. Republican officials arranged for large groups of former slaves from the surrounding area to travel by train to Memphis to register. Not only in Memphis, but in towns throughout West Tennessee white Southerners commented on the increasing frequency of political rallies attended by former slaves. In the summer of 1867, one Somerville resident observed, one of the largest political meetings former slaves held
in the county was widely attended by freed people “from the rural district.” Partly as a result of this enthusiasm, most eligible black men were registered to vote prior to the upcoming state election. In less than four months, the Chairman of the Republican Committee in Shelby County revealed that 7,140 African American men registered to vote by the end of the summer. Based on calculations from the 1870 census this suggests every potential black male voter registered in Shelby County. To countless former slaves registering to vote was inseparable from local efforts to secure and define freedom after the Civil War.

The public dimensions of elections made voting a community activity. On Election Day registered voters gathered in large numbers. By joining together, former slaves protected themselves from potential violence as well as reinforced the belief that the vote was an expression of collective autonomy. In the city’s first major election since black enfranchisement, separate polling stations were created for blacks and whites. While election officials did this to most likely minimize potential conflicts between former slaves and white Memphians, African Americans still exercised the vote collectively. Officials noted black voters congregating around polling places waiting for them to open. At one polling station the press estimated that 1,500 African Americans were present before voting started, while 1,000 individuals gathered at another station. They often arrived in groups. Former slaves from the surrounding countryside, for example, traveled together to Memphis to vote. African Americans in Shelby County represented almost fifty percent of the entire population,
and sixty percent of areas excluding Memphis. However, even though black residents represented a large portion of the total population, their dispersal on former plantations and the lack of state protection meant many chose to vote in Memphis. “Not feeling assured of protection in the county,” the Memphis Daily Post observed, “they came to the city in thousands.” Election Day in Memphis was transformed into a demonstration of freed people’s collective autonomy.

These collective strategies ensured voting rights were upheld. Even though the 1867 state election proceeded fairly peaceably, the Republican press noted, in some polling places former slaves were asked a number of “senseless questions.” Republican estimates that close to 3,000 black voters were unaccounted for in this election were more than likely an exaggeration, however, conservative efforts to suppress the Republican vote remained a persistent threat. Election Day strategies, therefore, manifested open demonstrations of black self-determination. The exuberance that accompanied these elections could result in open defiance of election rules. After a landslide victory for Republicans candidates in a county election held in the spring of 1868, conservatives complained that “radical negroes took possession of ballot boxes in several precincts and voted as often as they chose.” These methods, while subversive, were not unusual during Reconstruction. “Electoral politics,” Julie Saville argues, “was a component of, not an alternative to social struggles.”

Yet, contrary to the mass appeal of political participation, voter turnout never reached the 100% registration rate tallied for Memphis and Shelby County. In the 1867 state election, for example, 2,305 African Americans voted. For a population
of primarily illiterate former slaves this public display of independence was socially significant; yet, conservative estimates suggest this number represented only 61% of eligible black voters in Memphis. Throughout the Reconstruction era these numbers fluctuated. In the 1868 presidential election, for example, 4,362 African Americans cast a ballot for the Republican candidate. While this number represents almost a 100% increase from the previous election, it is misleading. Freed people from the surrounding countryside frequently voted in Memphis for national, state, and county elections. Therefore, a more accurate way to measure electoral participation in Memphis stems from municipal contests. African American turnout for city elections rarely exceeded 2,000 voters. In fact, in some instances, as little as 33% of potential voters took part in local contests. The disparity in numbers between these contests most likely derived from the different levels of importance former slaves placed upon local and national elections. Still prohibited from holding public office or sitting on juries, former slaves viewed maintaining Republican control of the state and national government as the more expedient way to transform the social order. Regardless, election results suggest not every registered voter turned out.

Who were these voters? By examining registration lists and the poll returns of eight local, state, and national elections from the post-Civil War era it is possible to create a profile of the urban electorate. Even though a majority of new voters shared a common history rooted in their slave experiences, electoral participation stemmed from former slaves’ daily interactions, current conditions, and future concerns about their status in the post-Civil War social order. Therefore, those who
regularly participated in electoral politics manifested a strong sense of place in their new urban environment. And, while these new voters were diverse, representing a broad spectrum of the urban working-class population, many belonged to one of the city’s neighborhood churches, trade associations, or mutual aid organizations. As a consequence of these social ties, voters often belonged to the same organizations, lived in close proximity to each other, and attended the same social events. An examination of almost twelve-hundred voters in Memphis demonstrates the importance of examining social and community networks to determine how former slaves experienced and expressed their freedom in the political arena.

Evidence suggests an individual’s long-term ties to Memphis did play a role in determining who voted. Several of the first registered voters were residents of the antebellum free black community. Frank Talley and Joseph Clouston, for example, both free blacks, were among the first 102 African Americans who registered to vote in Memphis. They both took a leadership role in public life and voted regularly. Other long-term residents among the first voters were most likely former slaves. Among those included Edward Gibson, a sawmill laborer born in Missouri, who lived in Memphis for almost twenty-years before the Civil War and belonged to Collins Methodist Episcopal church, the oldest African American congregation in Memphis. Others like Titus Harris, a barber who belonged to Avery Chapel, were born and raised in Memphis. Still, many new voters like Samuel Primus only arrived a few years before the war. Primus, a levee worker born in North Carolina, arrived in Memphis in 1857. He later became a member of the Union Forever Society.
information is sparse, out of 327 voters whose pre-Civil War residence can be determined 13% indicated they lived in Memphis before the war. More likely to be literate, these individuals Steven Hahn argues had “the greatest exposure to America’s public political culture.” More importantly, however, regardless of free or slave status, their organizational ties to the antebellum population solidified their sense of belonging in the community and placed them in daily contact with established social networks that kept them informed about local politics.

Yet, the majority of new voters were former slaves from the southern interior who migrated to Memphis during the Civil War era. Many shared a common past in the social dislocations that accompanied the antebellum slave trade. Spencer Henry, for example, was born in Virginia and sold to speculators at the age of nineteen. Enslaved in the Mid-South for thirty years, he arrived in Memphis just before the war began. Similarly, Dandy Brown, a twenty-six year old drayman originally from South Carolina, was separated from his family and sold in one of the slave markets in Charleston, South Carolina to a slave owner in Mississippi. Countless other voters shared similar experiences. Out of 1151 voters in Memphis, 32% were born in slaveholding states on the eastern seaboard. And, while their individual histories remain hidden in slave ledgers and plantation records that rarely recorded their names, it is reasonable to conclude that many were separated from their families and forced to work on the maturing cotton and sugar plantations in the southern interior. Often sold multiple times, these individuals were accustomed to reconstituting their lives in new environments.
What biographical data is available suggests most new voters came to Memphis from nearby cotton plantations in the Mississippi River Valley. For instance, Joseph Thomas, a fifty-four year old blacksmith born in South Carolina, lived in Vicksburg, Mississippi before he migrated to Memphis. Others included Henry Hunt, a former Union soldier, who was born in Missouri and later sold to a Mississippi plantation owner in one of the slave markets in Memphis. Their families were often dispersed throughout the region. Amos Patterson, a twenty-six year old carpenter from middle Tennessee, arrived in Memphis in 1862 and had family in Haywood County and Columbia, Tennessee. In all, forty-nine percent of new voters were born in either Tennessee or Mississippi. And while birthplace alone does not provide conclusive evidence to determine pre-war residence, it does suggest a significant portion of the urban electorate were former slaves from the surrounding countryside. Where antebellum residence could be determined, seventy-three percent migrated to Memphis from either Tennessee or Mississippi, the majority from counties in close proximity to the city.\textsuperscript{105} Voters, therefore, shared a common past forged as laborers on the cotton plantations in the Mississippi River Valley.

For many new voters their political consciousness was rooted in more than just their cultural history. It is important to remember that a majority of black southerners remained in rural areas either on or nearby the plantations of their former slave owners after the Civil War. And while those who remained on southern plantations challenged their former owners in countless ways, for many freed people the decision to migrate to urban areas like Memphis manifested an open declaration of defiance.
against the antebellum social order. Perhaps nothing demonstrated more their desire to claim independence than former slaves’ willingness to serve in the Union Army. Membership in the Union Army, Steven Hahn writes, “served as a great political crucible for African American men; it took thousands in the South and the North with varied experiences of subjection and struggle and melded them into an increasingly well-disciplined and self conscious army of liberation and unification.”

In Memphis black soldiers played an early organization role in the political mobilization of former slaves. Many remained in Memphis after the war and, not surprisingly, were well represented among the city’s first voters. A number of these former soldiers were migrants from the surrounding plantations in the region who were stationed in Memphis. William Williams, a former slave from Shelby County, James Watson, a former slave from Madison County, Tennessee, and Nelson Vincent, a former slave also from Madison County, Tennessee, all cast ballots in either local, state, or national elections. Their willingness to engage in battle undoubtedly reinforced their commitment to the transformation of the social order. Williams, for example, was wounded during the siege on Fort Pillow, while Kane McClellan, another former soldier and voter, suffered a gun shot wound in Tupelo, Mississippi, while fighting Confederate forces. In total, ten percent of the urban electorate identified were former Union soldiers. Their shared moments in battle, efforts to protect migrant communities during the war, and early political activism helped mobilize black Memphians for collective action. Yet, past experiences alone did not determine electoral participation.
Instead, political activism stemmed from black Memphians collective consciousness as well as former slaves daily interactions and sense of place in the community. Voters represented a wide spectrum of the post-Civil War black urban working-classes. An examination of over one-thousand voters’ occupations reveals they engaged in 110 different occupations. Largely composed of an unskilled working-class population of former slaves, the largest portion of voters was identified as only day laborers. In total, forty-two percent of voters were unskilled laborers. This included six percent of the urban electorate working along the river banks and steamboats engaged in transporting cotton and other raw materials on the Mississippi River. Another eleven percent of identified voters engaged in trade and transportation in the city as draymen, hack drivers, and expressmen. This group, while unskilled, included some of the city’s leading entrepreneurs, like Rufus McCain whose ownership of several drays made him one of the wealthiest African Americans in Memphis. Approximately one quarter of voters were identified as skilled laborers with a trade, while only three percent of voters were part of the professional and merchant class. Made up of a diverse group, voters occupations demonstrates the appeal electoral politics had to the city’s largely working population of former slaves.

A closer examination of voters does suggest occupational status did influence Election Day turn-out. While political rallies and registration efforts reached thousands of potential voters, only twenty-four percent of the city’s unskilled day laborers were identified among the electorate. This class of impoverished voters struggled daily for economic survival and was constantly subject to the unpredictable
labor demands in the city and surrounding rural areas. And while examination of economic mobility in Memphis remains to be done, these day laborers more than likely represented a significant portion of the fluctuating migrant population. On the other hand, other occupational classes displayed a higher portion of electoral participation. For example, sixty-two percent of known draymen and fifty-six percent of carpenters were among the city’s voters. Owing their own dray provided a modicum of economic security, while work as a drayman or a carpenter placed potential voters in daily contact with the wider community. Seventy percent of known members of either the Drayman Society or the Colored Mechanics Association were identified as voters.\textsuperscript{109} Most were established members of the entrepreneurial working-class, well known in the city, and took an active role in public life.

Former slaves’ electoral involvement affirmed the political influence of cooperative networks established during the Civil War era. Politic passions, Julie Saville argues, “infused the fibers of neighborhood life.”\textsuperscript{110} Most importantly, neighborhood associations provided autonomous social places to establish political strategies. They helped generate alliances and enforce political discipline. These associational ties most likely influenced their political consciousness and shared sense of civic responsibility. Twenty percent of the electorate identified had some associational ties to the local community.\textsuperscript{111} As a consequence of these social ties, voters were part of defined community networks that educated potential voters about the political process, forged alliances, and solidified former slaves’ sense of belonging in their communities.
These associations represented the various corporate interests of black Memphians. Not surprisingly members of the Sons of Ham were well represented among voters. One of the largest mutual aid associations in Memphis, sixteen out of twenty-three known community leaders in this organization were identified among the electorate. Made up of primarily carpenters, draymen, and plasterers, its members took an active role in urban public life. The Sons of Ham organized social events and political rallies throughout the post-Civil War era. The Young Men’s Association also demonstrated a direct correlation between civic life and political involvement. Nine out of thirteen of this organization’s representatives took part in electoral politics. Among these community activists were former slaves like Thomas Holland, an orderly from Holly Springs, Mississippi who migrated to Memphis during the war, along with affluent black Memphians, Joseph Clouston and Rufus McCain. Voting, therefore, was inextricably linked to community activity.

But many of these voters had more direct organizational ties to working-class migrant neighborhoods. Affiliated with the city’s Baptist congregations, the Sons, Daughters, and Sisters of Zion represented primarily ex-slaves. Members of these satellite organizations belonged to local churches, often living next door to each other. Dispersed throughout the city this diverse group of black Memphians created a political community rooted in neighborhood affiliation and civic activism. The majority of representatives from the Sons of Zion, for example, cast ballots at the polls. This included, for example, both Thomas Green and Solomon Green day laborers who migrated to Memphis during the Civil War era. Other neighborhood
associations were also involved in electoral politics. Twenty out of thirty-six members
of the Social Benevolent Societies and eleven out of twenty-three Union Forever
Society representatives were identified among the electorate.\textsuperscript{113} And while little
information is known about complete organizational membership, it was not
uncommon for two to three hundred individuals to belong to one association.
Therefore, when new voters came to the polls they did so not just as migrants or
former slaves, but as members of expansive social networks with defined roles in the
local community.

Black Memphians relied upon these social ties to devise cooperative strategies
and establish political independence. Scholars have long asserted in the institutional
and cultural importance of the church and neighborhood associations to claiming
freedom. Churches served as community centers and meeting places to hold political
rallies.\textsuperscript{114} Potential voters with multiple connections to religious congregations,
mutual aid societies, and trade associations listened carefully to prospective political
candidates make their case for community support. No one congregation guaranteed
political legitimacy. And, in Memphis, the dispersal of the black population in
enclaves throughout the city and the establishment of satellite congregations blended
well with ward politics. Beale Street Baptist Church and Salem Baptist Church
frequently held ward meetings. Located in the seventh and tenth wards, these
congregations were widely attended by working-class former slaves in the vicinity.\textsuperscript{115}
Black Memphians, Barbour Lewis noted, often organized these meetings
independently of white Republicans.\textsuperscript{116} Here delegates from respective wards for
Republican conventions were frequently chosen at public meetings to represent their neighborhoods. By organizing in such a fashion, political experiences remained inherently local and dependent on personal interactions between politicians and the urban electorate.

To southern conservatives African American enfranchisement represented the continued breakdown of the social order. African Americans, the Memphis Daily Appeal argued, had “no republican instincts” and “neither knows or cares about free government or well-regulated liberty.”\textsuperscript{117} It is no surprise, therefore, that charges of corruption accompanied the creation of new state and local governments after the Civil War. White Southerners believed former slaves were incapable of self-government. More immediately, white Memphians response to black enfranchisement reflected social fears that black empowerment constituted a danger to society. “Where the majority of the voters are ignorant and of inferior intellect, and depraved,” the conservative press claimed, “the most frightful anarchy must soon prevail.” No longer restrained by the oppressive strictures of slavery, former slaves, the paper continued, were incapable of anything, but “mischief” and would drag the South into a “bottomless gulf of barbarism.”\textsuperscript{118} As a result, black political agency escalated local struggles over who had the right to exercise public authority.

Conservatives did make half-hearted attempts to appeal to potential black voters. But they did so without recognizing former slaves’ legitimate claims to political rights. “The legislature,” C. S. Cameron, a leader of the Conservative Party
in Memphis argued, “had enfranchised a people differing from us in character, who have all their lives been in bondage and are ignorant of the duties of citizens.” Rather they based their political appeals to black voters on the failure of the Republican Party to offer full rights and privileges to former slaves. Cameron continued, “the radicals did not give the ballot to the blacks because they thought it right, but because they couldn’t carry the state without them.” And Republicans refusal to allow African Americans to hold political offices provided Conservatives with the premise to make their case. Cameron stated that while he opposed black enfranchisement he believed “if they were to vote, he was in favor of them holding offices.” The conservative platform, therefore, included the restoration of citizenship rights to the disenfranchised as well as assurances to former slaves “all the rights of freedmen.” Only a small delegation of black Memphians, however, supported the Conservative Party. Their motives were undoubtedly diverse and may have stemmed from either dissatisfaction for the Republican Party or personal connections to white Memphians. None were among known community activists. Other than endorsing African Americans right to hold political offices conservatives offered little to former slaves. In fact, conservative appeals to the city’s new voters were less than enthusiastic and their desire to restore voting rights to ex-Confederates threatened to reverse social and political gains made during Reconstruction.

Elite Memphians tried to minimize the threat of black autonomy. A local debate over the funding of the Metropolitan Police Force, for example, demonstrated how these social concerns influenced local governance. The Metropolitan Police
Force was established soon after the Memphis Massacre. Controlled by the state legislature, the bill established a newly trained force of professional recruits in order to reform the community-based ethnic force. This new police force, Altina Waller argues, was “trained to protect property in the downtown business section of the city” and, as a result, served the economic interests of elite Memphians. A letter from elite white Memphians to the city council in March of 1867 reaffirmed their support of this Republican controlled police force to maintain order over the largely working-class migrant population. In light of the “difficulties and dangers” to the present condition of the city, they argued in order to maintain “peace and safety” in the city, it remained necessary to support the Metropolitan Police until “by regular and peaceful action of the courts, the validity of the law can be ascertained and judicially settled.” By failing to support the Metropolitan Police, elite Memphians feared its absence would lead to “lawlessness” and would “injure the credit of the city and prevent the making of necessary improvements” needed after the Civil War. Their concerns demonstrated white southerners’ tendency to criminalize the public behavior of former slaves and refusal to recognize them as sovereign members of the community.

Elite Memphians fears about black autonomy escalated as a result of the organizational success of registration and the entry of former slaves into public life. Rumors that former slaves were organizing into military companies and drilling at night circulated throughout the city in the months leading up to the first election since black enfranchisement. These stories were not unlike the ones shared among white Memphians prior to the infamous Memphis Massacre. Now empowered with the
franchise, conservatives believed once again former slaves were planning an insurrection to completely overturn the social order. It is not clear whether these reports were even partially true or merely unfounded gossip. The large political rallies held by African Americans throughout the summer of 1867 and the military rituals that accompanied parades and celebrations most likely helped raise white concerns. Regardless of the accuracy of these stories, conservatives attempted to organize to protect white citizens from potential violence on Election Day. A petition submitted by white Memphians to the Metropolitan Police Force demonstrated their belief that black enfranchisement would lead to social disorder.

> We the undersigned citizens and property holders of Memphis, being desirous of peace and good order should be maintained in our city during the forthcoming election, and that all tendency to riot should be averted and thinking the best plan that could be adopted in our midst would be for you to summon to your aid 1500 men for the above specific purposes, so that the fame of our city shall not be tarnished by any disgraceful turmoil whatever.\(^{123}\)

Their appeals for additional protection were rejected. And even though the election proceeded without any large scale confrontations, the election convinced few white southerners that former slaves had a legitimate claim to exercising political rights in the public arena.

Instead, local conservatives employed many of the same tactics used by southern Democrats to intimidate black voters. Throughout the region, landowners relied on their economic power to suppress voter turnout. In Trenton, Tennessee, northwest of Memphis, conservatives threatened to turn former slaves “out of employment” if they voted Republican, while in Brownsville threats of violent reprisals against former slaves for voting were common. Other whites resorted to
subterfuge by informing potential voters that the election was postponed. But, despite persistent intimidation, rural laborers cast their ballot at the polls. White southerners responded by following through with their warnings. Countless freed people were displaced from the land as a result of voting in their first election. For example, in an affidavit submitted to the Freedmen’s Bureau, Peter Shelton, a sharecropper in Shelby County, testified that prior to the election his landowner informed him that if he traveled to Memphis to vote his family would have to vacate their plot of land. Shelton did anyway and when he was away his wife was beaten and he was unable to return home. To white southerners voting represented an open act of defiance to the antebellum social order and escalated their coercive efforts to maintain public dominance. Local officials noted a rise in outrages committed against freed people in the region “by reason of the active part taken by them in the recent political campaign.” Disenfranchised and prohibited from holding local offices, white Southerners found other means to exercise political power.

These political struggles took place not just in rural areas. In Memphis, violent incidents transpired on Election Day. The Republican Press noted some of the city’s new voters were physically attacked. Compared to rural areas, these types of confrontations were comparatively low. Because African Americans operated collectively at the polls, opportunities to assault voters were minimized. The republican controlled police force and the deployment of federal troops provided additional protection. Although this did not mean members of the urban electorate were not subjected to repercussions for their actions. The majority of African
Americans were working-class and dependent on white Memphians for employment. Lacking control of their labor, these workers were vulnerable to political retaliation by their employers. Days after the state election in August of 1867, the Post noted numerous voters were fired from their jobs for voting Brownlow. Those discharged included several draymen along with unskilled manual laborers.\textsuperscript{129} Mass firings were rare, however. While white Memphians refused to recognize former slaves as social and political equals, the local economy depended on their labor to operate.

Between the years 1867 and 1868 the violence and intimidation directed at former slaves intensified in West Tennessee. Ex-confederates began organizing in small squads to drive new voters off the land and punish them for political participation. Symbols of black political autonomy were routinely attacked by white Southerners. Schools and churches were burned down and teachers were driven out of small towns. Excluded from formal politics in Tennessee, vigilante groups designed to weaken the Republican Party by intimidating black voters and restore the antebellum social order emerged in the region. The Ku Klux Klan became a political force in West Tennessee. In preparation for the national election in 1868, Klan terrorism spread throughout the region. It led the Republican legislature to empower the governor to raise a new militia and impose martial law in counties throughout the state.\textsuperscript{130} Made up of former Confederate soldiers, poor and wealthy whites, the Klan threatened to reverse the gains of Reconstruction and remove African Americans from public life in the South.
It was at the local level were black southerners achieved some of their most tangible results. Here, Steven Hahn notes, former slaves had “the opportunity to contest the power of their superiors in the formal institutions of governance that affected their lives most directly.”¹³¹ The election of white Republican magistrates, constables, or sheriffs, offered the chance to place in office individuals more likely to impose a more equitable form of justice. By 1868, African American organizing in Shelby County was beginning to achieve political dividends. Still barred from holding political offices, a contingent of African Americans were able to nominate a candidate for Sheriff in opposition to the one preferred by Republican leaders for the upcoming county elections that spring.¹³² This was followed by a decisive political victory. The Republican nominee for Sheriff defeated the conservatives by several thousand votes. Yet, for black Memphians to carve out political space for themselves in the new social order they had to withstand the persistent threats of violence and intimidation from white southerners.

In Memphis, increased Klan activity followed black political success. Like Klan affiliations in the countryside, bands of white Memphians formed secret organizations intent on reestablishing their dominance over the public and private lives of former slaves. Immediately after the county election, the Post noted the formation of the division of the Klan under the name of the Shrouded Brothers of Memphis.¹³³ This secret organization, political leaders in Memphis argued, was designed “to intimidate Republican speakers and prevent voting.”¹³⁴ Murders of black men were blamed on Klan activity in the surrounding area. And in April, the disruption of a
Klan meeting by the Metropolitan Police Force highlighted the malevolent intentions of its members. The police raided a Klan gathering held one evening and arrested several members. Surrounded by secrecy, everyone arrested possessed a mask made of black cloth “with holes for the eyes, but concealing the remainder of the face.” Even more ominous, police discovered an assassination list made up of prominent white and black political leaders voted upon by Klan members. Barbour Lewis, the head of the Shelby County Republican Party, received the most votes. These plans were never carried out. But, while it is not clear whether or not this was a legitimate threat, the assassination of political leaders and the murder of new voters throughout the South made the specter of Klan activity a real concern in Memphi.

Its organization demonstrated the depth of political resistance to white conservatives’ loss of control over local affairs. Members sought the restoration of the antebellum social order. They swore an oath that “all Radicals and negroes, who have plundered themselves opposite to the interests of the owners of the soil of Tennessee shall forever be may enemies.” And they displayed a willingness to use violence to expedite the end of Reconstruction. Members promised to welcome their enemies “with bloody hands to hospitable graves.” Information on the extent of support for the Klan in Memphi is inconclusive. Police did discover a roster of names of twenty-five members. These were mostly young men of modest means. However, additional evidence suggests the Klan may have been widely supported by both middle-class and elite Memphians. Discovered at the meeting was a list of an additional thirty-five members identified only by number. Jack Campbell, an editor of
the Memphis *Daily Avalanche* and identified by one member of the Klan as the Grand Cyclops of the Order, insinuated the organization may have included more prominent Memphians. While most of the members who signed the card were young, he stated, “behind such are a number of other men who have not as yet joined the assault upon me, and whose names I do not consider would be honorable to bring into this matter.”¹³⁸ Who these individuals were remains a matter of speculation. Although three well known white Memphians had ties to the Klan. Ex-Confederate General Nathan Bedford Forrest was named the first Grand Wizard of the Klan, while Minor Meriwether and M. C. Galloway, two former Confederates with property and economic influence, were associated with the Klan.¹³⁹ All three of these individuals were actively involved in conservative politics and displayed ambition for political offices. For many former Confederates the Klan operated as the underground wing of the local Democrat Party.

Combined with African Americans open declarations of independence, white southerners’ reticence behavior made partisan politics contentious. Prior to the first national election since black enfranchisement, Republican rallies were immense. Political candidates for Congressional offices spoke directly to local concerns by arguing in favor of legislation to suppress Klan activity and protect former slaves from violence.¹⁴⁰ White southerners, however, blamed the perceived aggressive behavior of former slaves for making politics combative. Conservatives complained that black militiamen were drilling nightly, thereby escalating racial tensions.¹⁴¹ After the Civil War, African Americans maintained military associations and organized independent
protective associations. While their activities served primarily ceremonial purposes, their presence undoubtedly unnerved many whites. For their part, black Memphians denied accusations that they were training regularly. In August of 1868, several hundred African Americans organized a public meeting to denounce these charges. Despite these denials, the perception among white Southerners that black residents were organized and engaged in military activity remained. The Superintendent of the Metropolitan Police Force deployed armed policemen to the bluff to oversee the gathering to minimize potential confrontations. And in response to these concerns, white Southerners targeted black southerners with ties to military associations. Not long after the gathering, the Post noted, the Klan harassed “a famous colored drum major” at his home one night and demanded his surrender. Throughout the 1868 election campaign, the paramilitary behavior of black Memphians and white southerners made popular politics a contested public terrain.

While the majority of conservatives were not members of the Klan, its goals were shared by affluent Memphians. Established white residents looked for ways to minimize the property-less class political influence and restore the antebellum social order. A citizens committee organized by elite Memphians petitioned the municipal government not to raise taxes, while a movement in favor of the creation of a Board of City Commissioners to take charge of local affairs and suppress popular democracy began to emerge.\textsuperscript{142} Yet, similar to the Klan, most elite action focused on ending Radical influence in the state government and restoring the franchise to ex-Confederates. Rather than condemning vigilante terrorism conservatives blamed
Radical policies for escalating political tensions. A plan submitted by Nathan Bedford Forrest and other ex-Confederate generals to the state government in favor of the restoration of voting privileges to white men as a way to end Klan violence was widely supported by conservative Memphians.\textsuperscript{143} Forrest, who claimed to no longer be a member, defended the organization as “a protective military organization” and, in response to legislative efforts to pass a new militia bill, he charged, “if they send the black men to hurt those Confederate soldiers whom they call KKKlux, then I say to you ‘Go out and shoot the Radicals’.”\textsuperscript{144} Conservative support of the Klan in Tennessee, Ben Severance observes, remained mixed. They celebrated “its effectiveness in weakening the Radical party apparatus in many counties,” while they deplored its methods when it prompted a coercive response from state legislatures.\textsuperscript{145}

Even though vigilante organizations operated clandestinely, local battles for political power often took place on a very public stage. Emboldened by the franchise and their determination to establish independence, African Americans openly challenged conservative attempts to reestablish exclusive claims to public power. Political rallies provided African Americans with the opportunity to display their collective desire to remain active in local political debates. An estimated crowd of 6,000 Republicans participated in a torchlight procession through the streets of Memphis to the Bluff in order to demonstrate their unwillingness to be intimidated by white Southerners. Participants carried banners that criticized the actions of conservatives. A flag with the capitation “Democrat friend of the colored men” was surrounded by pictures of pistols, daggers, and the Klan. Largely aimed at illiterate
population of former slaves, black politics relied on visual imagery to make their case to potential voters. Other messages aimed their ire at the demands of elite Memphians. Conservatives repeatedly protested higher taxes, which they argued disproportionately affected property-holders. The “Rebellion made taxes” one banner, however, reminded its audience.146 Gatherings such as this one remained consistent with early community political efforts. Mobilized around their common criticism of the antebellum social order, the black urban electorate affirmed their desire to maintain independence from white southern authority.

Political meetings emerged as part of armed struggles over who had the right to dictate local affairs. Both white and blacks carried weapons to rallies and organizational meetings in Memphis. Violence and coercion were a common component of community politics in the American South. In response to this behavior, the Superintendent of the Metropolitan Police Force strived to prevent a conflict “between opposing political elements in the city” by ending the practice “of carrying fire-arms upon occasions of political gatherings.” Black Memphians refused. Political leaders were quick to note as long as conservatives threatened their lives this political practice would continue.147 No doubt well established political alliances provided African Americans with the collective strength to stand up to former slave owners.

Partly because political networks in Memphis were already well developed, African American voters were able to maintain their independence and defy attempts by white conservatives to suppress voter turnout. In West Tennessee counties,
vigilante bands effectively disrupted Union leagues and diminished grass-roots support for the Republican Party. Although federal troops were deployed in the 1868 national election the region witnessed a decline in black voters. This was especially true in counties where African Americans constituted a clear minority. However, in Shelby County black turnout for the Republican Party remained consistent. In the ten wards of Memphis, ninety-percent of the almost 5,000 ballots cast for Ulysses S. Grant were African Americans. And despite the formation of an independent ticket, black voters also easily defeated the conservative candidate for Congress. In fact, even though the Klan picketed the town to prevent potential voters from entering the city, African American turnout actually increased slightly from the county elections held that spring. In less than two years since black enfranchisement, a distinct political community formed and through their experience as voters black Memphians solidified their place independently of local political parties.

Though white Republicans and conservative Southerners considered former slaves less than social or political equals, black Memphians carved out political space in the post-Civil War social order. Political mobilization depended on autonomous social networks already in place before enfranchisement. African American protests against their exclusion from the public sphere helped solidify community alliances and strengthen their sense of belonging in the new urban environment. Mobilized around their criticism of the antebellum social order, a distinct political community formed around personal relationships, neighborhood associations, and a shared feeling of civic
responsibility. While black voters were diverse, electoral participation was inextricably linked to various levels of community attachment. And, despite resistance from white Southerners, black Memphians used the vote to express their desire for independence and local autonomy. Once white Southerners were re-enfranchised and the state of Tennessee was redeemed, these corporate alliances would play a central role in shaping political debate around community concerns.

1 Since the English translation of Jurgen Habermas’ study on The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere American historians have used the public domain as a mode of historical inquiry to study a variety of social groups and the proliferation of public spaces in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. See for example, Houston A. Baker, Jr., “Critical Memory and the Black Public Sphere,” in The Black Public Sphere: A Public Culture Book, ed. the Black Public Sphere Collective (Chicago: the University of Chicago Press, 1995), 5-38; Joanna Brooks, “The Early American Public Sphere and the Emergence of a Black Print Counterpublic,” William and Mary Quarterly 62 (Winter 2005); Elsa Barkley Brown, “Negotiating and Transforming the Public Sphere: African American Political Life in the Transition from Slavery to Freedom,” in The Black Public Sphere, 111-150; Craig Calhoun, ed., Habermas and the Public Sphere (Cambridge: MIT, 1992); Michael C. Dawson, “A Black Counterpublic?: Economic Earthquakes, Racial Agenda(s), and Black Politics,” in The Black Public Sphere, 199-228; Jurgen Habermas, The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere: An Inquiry into a Category of Bourgeois Society, trans. Thomas Burger with the assistance of Frederick Lawrence (Cambridge: MIT, 1989); Thomas C. Holt, “After Word: Mapping the Black Public Sphere,” in The Black Public Sphere, 325-328; Mary P. Ryan, “Civil Society as Democratic Practice: North American Cities during the Nineteenth Century,” Journal of Interdisciplinary History 29 (Spring 1999). Laura Edwards argues the social and political transformations that accompanied Reconstruction demonstrated elite southerners’ inability “to control public space.” Laura F. Edwards, Gendered Strife and Confusion: The Political Culture of Reconstruction (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1997), 14.

2 These observations are summarized from newspaper accounts from the Memphis Daily Appeal, the Memphis Daily Avalanche, and the Memphis Daily Post.


4 May 13, 1867, reel 11 and May 16, 1867, reel 13, Records of the Memphis Sub-District, Memphis and Shelby County Library. (Hereafter cited as RMSD).

5 This literature is extensive. For two excellent studies that examine these events in relation to black and white southerners attempt to define their place in the new social order see Laura F. Edwards, Gendered Strife and Confusion and Glenda Elizabeth Gilmore, Gender and Jim Crow: Women and the Politics of White Supremacy in North Carolina, 1896-1920 (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina, 1996).

6 Steven Hahn argues in his examination of the political mobilization of former slaves that “the building blocks of collective behavior – of politics – among freedpeople almost everywhere in the early postemancipation South were kinship and shared experiences.” Hahn, A Nation Under Our Feet, 176.
In Memphis and other urban areas, the displacement of formerly enslaved people from the countryside to southern cities severed many kinship ties from antebellum communities. The creation of new religious institutions and neighborhood associations does speak to the malleability of kinship, however in relation to African Americans efforts to create new meaningful relationships in urban areas. Similarly, Julie Saville argues in rural areas political alliances were forged from kinship and personal relationships with roots in slavery. Saville, The Work of Reconstruction, 169.

8 Steven Hahn, A Nation Under Our Feet, 118.


10 For a discussion over the struggle of African Americans to enter the public sphere see Chapters One and Two.


12 Memphis Daily Bulletin, April 12, 1865.

13 Edwards, Gendered Strife and Confusion, 18; Foner, Reconstruction, 122.

14 Memphis Daily Bulletin, April 12, 1865.


18 Kevin R. Hardwick, “‘Your Old Father Abe Lincoln is Dead and Damned’: Black Soldiers and the Memphis Riot of 1866,” Journal of Social History 27 (Autumn 1993), 109-128.

19 Daily Bulletin, April 12, 1865.

20 Daily Argus, May 25, 1865, 3.

21 Daily Argus, May 25, 1865, 3.


23 Despite the continued restrictions on black autonomy, the presence of the Union Army and the demise of former slave owners’ authority represented a historical moment when, as James Scott suggests, former slaves made their hidden transcripts public. James C. Scott, “A Saturnalia of Power: The First Public Declaration of the Hidden Transcript,” in Domination and the Arts of Resistance: Hidden Transcripts (New Haven: Yale University, 1990), 202-228. The inclusion of men and women is representative of the mass participatory democratic discourse that was a product of African Americans collective struggle for freedom. In Richmond and other areas, Elza Barkley Brown argues, African Americans “enacted their understandings of democratic political discourse through mass meetings attended and participated in (including voting) by men, women, and children and through mass participation in Republican Party conventions.” As a result of mass involvement, former slaves produced a “fairly egalitarian discourse.” Elza Barkely Brown, “Negotiating and Transformation the Public Sphere: African American Political Life in the Transition from Slavery to Freedom,” in The Black Public Sphere, 111-150.


25 See chapters two and three.
Registers of Signatures of Depositions in Branches of the Freedman’s Saving and Trust Company, 1865-1874, Memphis, Tennessee, National Archives, Records Group 101.

Daily Bulletin, April 21, 1865.

Hardwick, “Your Old Father Abe Lincoln is Dead and Damned,” 117.


Daily Bulletin, May 2, 1865.

Similar to Michel Foucault’s argument on the impact of modernization on the transformation of punishment, in urban areas in the American South rural migrants were considered a threat to property rights and once tolerated illegalities became intolerable and classified as vagrancy and a “danger to society.” See Michel Foucault, Discipline and Punish: the Birth of the Prison, trans. Alan Sheridan (1977, New York: Vintage Books, 1995), 84-89.


Daily Post, January 25, 1866; February 25, 1866; March 1, 1866.

Foner, Reconstruction, 247, 248, 250.

Daily Avalanche, March 15, 1866.

Daily Avalanche, March 31, 1866.

Daily Avalanche, April 1, 1866, 2.

Daily Post, May 13, 1866.


Daily Post July 26, 1866.

Memphis Public Ledger, August 27, 1866.

Daily Post, September 18, 19, 1866.

Public Ledger, October 1866; Memphis Daily Post October 12, 15, 1866.


Daily Post, October 11, 1866.

Daily Avalanche, January 3, 1866.

Daily Avalanche, April 4, 5, 12, 1866.

Daily Post, March 31, 1866.

Foner, Reconstruction, 45.

Daily Post, March 29, 31, 1866.

Daily Post, July 12, August 2, 1866; Public Ledger, August 2, 1866.

Hahn, A Nation Under Our Feet, 120, 121.


Memphis Daily Post, July 12, 1866.

Memphis Daily Post, June 9, 1866, July 21, 1866.

For discussion on the cooperative decision making process among former slaves in the post-emancipation era see for example Brown, “Negotiating and Transforming the Public Sphere,” 115-130 and Julie Saville, The Work of Reconstruction., 170-177.


The right to an education represented one of the first political demands made by local communities throughout the American South. Literacy served as a source of empowerment by helping freed people shed their slave status, elevate themselves and their communities, and protect their citizenship rights. See Christopher M. Span, “I Must Learn Now or Not at All’: Social and Cultural Capital in the Educational Initiatives of Formerly Enslaved African Americans in Mississippi, 1862-1869,” Journal of African American History 87 (Spring 2002): 196-205. In Memphis, former slaves urgently embraced educational opportunities opened to them during the Civil War era. Not only did northern missionaries establish schools, but African American churches established Sabbath schools in neighborhoods throughout the city. Many of these schools were supported by members of the city’s diverse network of mutual aid societies. Educational activities, therefore, reinforced freed people’s sense of civic responsibility, solidified social networks, and helped make political participation a community affair.

Daily Post kept a weekly list of newly registered voters for the month of May. Daily Post, May, 1867. Because white and blacks registered on alternate days it is possible compile a list of African American registered voters separately. J. S. Chandler to H. H. Thomas, May 21, 1867, John Eaton Papers, University of Tennessee at Knoxville.

J. S. Chandler to H. H. Thomas, May 21, 1867, John Eaton Papers.
Francis A. Walker, *A Compendium of the Ninth Census*, Compiled Pursuant to a Concurrent Resolution of Congress, and under the Direction of the Secretary of Interior (Washington: Government Printing Office, 1872). The compendium did not provide the number of male citizens by race. As a result, the registration rate is based on the proportion of black males in Shelby County and Memphis.

Ibid.

*A Compendium of the Ninth Census.*

*Daily Post*, August 2, 1867.


*Daily Post*, March 9, 1868.


*Daily Post*, August 5, 1867.

Walker, *A Compendium of the Ninth Census*.

*Daily Post*, January 2, 1868; *Daily Appeal*, January 8, 1869.

The names of the city’s first black registered voters are located in the Memphis *Daily Post*, May 1867. In addition while election returns are incomplete, poll records for local, state, and national elections held in the city of Memphis provide additional evidence on actual voters. See Poll Books, City of Memphis, Colored Wards, 1-10, 1868-1872, Shelby County Archives. To compile a profile of the African American electorate in Memphis these names were cross-referenced with the 1870 federal census, city directories, and the deposit slips of the Freedmen’s Saving and Trust Company. See the Population Schedules of the Ninth Census, City of Memphis, Wards 1-10; the Registers of the Signatures of Depositions in Branches of the Freedmen’s Saving and Trust Company; and the following city directories: *Boyle and Chapman’s Memphis Directory*, 1873, 1874, 1876; *Edward’s Annual City Directory*, 1870, 1871, and 1872; and *Sholes City Directory*, 1877.

See the previous chapter.

Ibid.


See note 100.

Ibid.


See note 100.

Ibid. Also see Dray Bonds and Licenses, City of Memphis, Shelby County Archives.

See note 100.


See note 100.

Ibid.

Ibid.


For a discussion of population dispersal and neighborhood associations see chapter three.

Barbour Lewis to John Eaton, February 5, 1868, John Eaton Papers, the University of Tennessee at Knoxville.

*Daily Appeal*, March 6, 1867.

*Daily Appeal*, March 21, 1867.

*Daily Post*, April 11, 15, 18, 1867.

121 Daily Post, March 22, 1867.
122 Daily Post, July 31, 1867.
123 Daily Post, July 29, 1867.
124 Daily Post, July 31, 1867; James Poston to F. S. Palmer, July 20, 1867, reel 13, J. S. Poston to F. S. Palmer, July 20, 1867, reel 13, June 29, 1867, reel 11, RMSD.
125 Circular, August 2, 1867, reel 11, Carlin to John Lawrence, August 5, 1867, reel 11, RMSD; August 7, 1867, Selected Records of the Tennessee Field Office for the State of Tennessee, Bureau of Refugees, Freedmen, and Abandoned Lands, reel 3. (Hereafter cited as RTFO).
126 Affidavit of Peter Shelton, 1867, reel 13, RMSD.
127 F. S. Palmer, August 21, 1867, reel 3, RTFO.
128 Memphis Daily Post, August 5, 1867.
129 Memphis Daily Post, August 6, 1867.
131 Hahn, A Nation Under Our Feet, 218.
132 Barbour Lewis to John Eaton, February 16, 1867, John Eaton Papers.
133 Daily Post, March 11, 1868.
134 Daily Post, April 7, 1868.
135 Daily Post, April 7, 15, April 21, May 1, 1867.
136 Daily Post, April 7, 1867.
137 Daily Post, May 1, 1867.
138 Daily Post, May 1, 1867.
139 Elizabeth Meriwether, Recollection of 92 Years, 1824-1916 (Nashville, 1959).
140 Daily Post, August 5, 1868.
141 Daily Post, August 18, 1868.
142 Daily Post, February 12, 13, 1868.
143 Daily Post, August 10, 1868; Severance, Tennessee’s Radical Army, 181.
144 Memphis Daily Post, August 12, 1868; Severance, Tennessee’s Radical Army, 183.
145 Prior to the fall election, Governor Brownlow signed into law a new anti-Klan bill and militia bill to stifle a conservative counter-insurgency in Middle and West Tennessee. See Severance, Tennessee’s Radical Army, 188.
146 Daily Post, September 11, 1868.
147 Daily Post, September 13, 15, 1868.
148 Daily Post, November 4, 1868; Severance, Tennessee’s Radical Army, 190.
Chapter 6: Community Politics

In 1875, soon after the death of Charles Sumner, a long-time advocate for emancipation and civil rights legislation, black community leaders held a public ceremony in his honor. Similar to other post-Civil War celebrations and commemorations, the city’s leading mutual aid and benevolent societies congregated in the center of downtown Memphis at Court Square to hold a memorial procession. The procession included not only some of the city’s more prosperous and established organizations like the Sons of Ham and the Independent Pole-Bearers, but also neighborhood associations composed primarily of working-class former slaves such as the city’s Benevolent Societies, Mutual Aid Societies, and chapters of the Union of Zion. Undoubtedly these former slaves were aware of the role Sumner played in fighting for the end of slavery and civil rights for African Americans. To many of those in attendance this event also had local significance. In the years following the Civil War, former slaves experienced and expressed their freedom through politics and the independent initiative of neighborhood associations. Even though black Memphians secured their right to vote their social and political concerns remained largely ignored by white Democrats and Republicans alike. In the post-redeemption era, however, strife within both parties and the decentralized nature of community politics helped forge new alliances. In the recent municipal election, a coalition of
Irish conservatives, white and black Republican leaders, and African American neighborhood associations successfully defeated an independent political party supported by elite Memphians. The public ceremony in honor of Sumner symbolized the political significance of this new union. Unlike previous public gatherings that received little attention from city representatives, the newly elected mayor and public officials participated in the event. Certainly the significance the mayor and black elected officials marching side by side with community organizations would not have been lost on those participating and witnessing this event. Commenting on the scope of community involvement, the Daily Appeal reported it took approximately a half-hour for the procession to pass a single point.¹ For the first time in history, it appeared as if black voters played a role in influencing local affairs in Memphis.

The biracial alliance ushered in a new era of community politics. Composed of disaffected Democrats and Republicans, the strength of the coalition relied on the ability of competing interests to mobilize around short-term goals and objectives. These unions were invariably fragile and often short-lived; however, they helped elevate neighborhood concerns to the center of public debate. They also symbolized the declining importance of the black political elite in Memphis. No longer able to rely on the power and influence of the Republican Party, the black political elite responded increasingly to the initiatives and concerns of neighborhood voters who had grown disillusioned with their focus on elected office, patronage, and civil rights. Instead, voters looked to politics for ways to express their collective consciousness by protecting the social integrity of their communities. This focus on local concerns also
provided room for elite conservatives to change their political strategy to make room for the corporate interests of former slaves. In order to reclaim their exclusive right to control local affairs elite Memphians were forced to compromise their views of citizenship by recognizing former slaves’ right to participate in the public sphere so long as it did not substantially challenge race or class boundaries.

The decade after the Civil War was filled with economic uncertainty. At the close of the 1860s, the city did begin to return to its pre-war prosperity. But, just as the city’s economy began to grow, an escalating municipal debt, tax delinquencies, and yellow fever epidemics stifled economic development. “Except for 1866 and the two or three years preceding the Panic of 1873,” Lynette Wrenn observes in her detailed study on the city’s financial crisis, “the Memphis economy languished.”

Prior to the war the city leaders relied on municipal bonds to pay for public improvements and continued this practice in the post-Civil War era to promote economic growth. The city’s ability to repay this debt was hampered by high levels of property tax delinquency, declining cotton prices, and a national financial crisis in 1873. Throughout the decade, the city government repeatedly defaulted on interests payments and by 1874, Wrenn notes, Memphis bonded indebtedness was almost four million dollars. Two devastating yellow fever epidemics in the 1870s contributed to declining property values and the city’s overall population. Many of those citizens who did not perish from disease fled the city. As a result, between 1870 and 1880 the population declined from 40,226 to 33,592.
This fluctuating economy provided limited opportunities for black Memphians. Evidence suggests the majority of black Memphians remained in low-paying unskilled jobs. In fact, between 1870 and 1879 the proportion of African American workers identified as general day laborers actually increased from twenty-six percent to thirty-three percent. To many of these workers the economic uncertainties that accompanied this era made their material security just as precarious as the previous decade. Most likely they remained part of the migrant labor force that depended on seasonal employment on cotton plantations in the surrounding area or provided manual labor on the levees and in the warehouse during harvest season for survival. While this large pool of cheap laborers ensured Memphis remained the largest inland cotton market in the world, this work provided few financial rewards for black Memphians. Skilled and professional jobs were limited to only a small portion of the African American working population. The number of carpenters, blacksmiths, shoemakers, and plasterers, for example, remained consistent throughout the decade. The only occupation that showed a substantial increase was the number of African American draymen and hack drivers operating in the city. 4 Most drivers were unskilled laborers employed by warehouse operators, lumber mills, and cottonseed manufacturers, providing no chance for economic advancement.

Only a small portion of black Memphians were able to accumulate wealth. Compared to white Memphians the amount of real estate and personal property held by African Americans was significantly lower. 5 And black Memphians use of the Freedmen’s Saving Bank suggests personal and community savings were also
proportionately lower than other black communities. By the time of the bank’s closure in 1874 there were over thirty branches throughout the Upper and Lower South. Most depositors were unskilled laborers who managed to put away a few cents to a few dollars. In 1874, sources estimate there were 700 active accounts worth approximately $57,000 in Memphis. And, while the amount of individual deposits was often small to a day laborer or washerwoman this money symbolized their hard work, independence, and possibility for economic advancement. But, when compared to other branches black Memphians use of the bank was not as widespread. After its first two years of existence, the bank had 444 deposits worth more than $34,000. This represented less than 3% of the total black population. In Mobile, a similar sized black community maintained 1,688 depositors representing almost 11% of the total population by the end of 1868. Despite the large number of churches, mutual aid societies, and trade organizations that used the Memphis branch, the number of active accounts fell below the average in other black communities. At the time of the bank’s failure the number of active accounts in Memphis represented less than 2% of the institutions active depositors. The majority of accounts were opened in cities like Charleston, South Carolina, Richmond, Virginia, and Washington D.C. where more prosperous and established antebellum black communities existed.

Even though the number of black depositors was proportionately less than other cities, the bank’s failure in 1874 still hit the black community especially hard. Depositors received news about the potential collapse of the bank by word-of-mouth and crowds of black southerners gathered to demand payment of their savings as a
result. Bank runs in Nashville, Augusta, Savannah, and Montgomery were common. And, in Memphis, black residents gathered outside the local branch in the fall of 1873 to reclaim their savings. As the Memphis *Daily Appeal* observed, they arrived with an overwhelming sense of anxiety at the prospects of losing what little amount of money they had been able to save. The crowd reluctantly disbanded only after the cashier explained the bank’s new sixty day notice policy required to withdraw money and assured those gathered their money was protected. The bank survived this first crisis, but was unable to sustain itself for long and it closed in 1874 resulting in a loss of $57,000 for depositors in the Memphis branch. Less than a decade since their emancipation, former slaves and the majority of the city’s benevolent and neighborhood associations had few material rewards to show for their daily laborers.

Despite the material plight of the city’s working-class black population, African American economic and social conditions rarely received public recognition. The conservative press either ignored black neighborhood life or treated it with curiosity and contempt. Similar to most southern regions, an examination of daily newspapers reveals limited interest in African American daily life. More often, the press covered perceived examples of black criminality and impoverishment that reinforced negative stereotypes about African American behavior. Confrontations between blacks and whites were labeled “negro outrages,” while reports of vagrancy heightened white Memphians fears about a large population of former slaves in their midst. As a consequence of these fears, arrest records received constant attention. To many white residents and local politicians they did not need to address the concerns of
the majority black working-class, migrant population precisely because their place existed outside the boundaries of civil society.

Instead, municipal authorities focused primarily on the concerns of merchants and property-holders. Political debates over public improvements and how to stimulate the economy received constant attention from white Republicans and Democrats alike. In 1867, for example, the city government’s decision to issue $900,000 in paving bonds to an unknown company making the lowest bid generated a public outcry. A depression, along with the unwillingness of property-holders to pay their assessments, made it impossible for the paving company to cover its costs leaving the city with a million dollar debt. In the years to follow wealthy Memphians blamed the debt on the “odious and unconstitutional franchise law” that excluded most property-holders from the political arena and placed local affairs in the hands of Radical Republicans and former slaves. In reality, few black Memphians voted in this election or subsequent elections for public improvements.

Although these public improvements contributed to the city’s escalating debt, elite Memphians continued to support economic policies that advanced their own personal interests. By 1870 five major railroads connected Memphis to the surrounding areas. Most of these railroads were financed by municipal bonds before the war and were considered essential to facilitating economic growth. Railroads connected Memphis to cotton producing areas in the Mississippi Valley and the textile mills in the north, helping Memphis capitalize on the trade and processing of cotton. Railroad development remained important after the war. Elite Memphians supported
the rebuilding of railways destroyed in the war and the financing of future ventures.
For the merchant and property-holders railroads had the potential to improve the city’s
economic position as the largest inland cotton market in the world, raise property
values, and open up new business opportunities for wealthy investors. They also
accounted for the city’s escalating debt. By 1873, railroads accounted for 33% of
Memphis and Shelby County’s taxes.¹³ Many white Memphians, however, raised few
objections to raising bonds for economic developments. In 1871, a group of real
estate investors, property owners, and influential professionals asked the city to
subscribe to an additional $200,000 in bonds to make an addition to the Mississippi
Railroad. The measure easily passed with 1,618 for the bonds and only 156 against.
These policies offered few benefits the city’s predominately poor, working-class black
population, as a result black Memphians showed little interest in these economic
debates. Almost fifty-percent of the votes recorded took place in the first and second
wards where black southerners accounted for a small minority.¹⁴

More often than not, partisan battles for patronage and elected offices also
meant the local concerns of black Memphians were ignored. Throughout the post-
Civil War era, Republican and Democrat Party leader’s competed over political spoils.
This focus on the electoral process and the building of local parties left little room for
black community concerns. Intense political infighting within both parties also
limited the substance of politics in Memphis.¹⁵ The Republican and Democrat Parties
were divided amongst various constituencies who looked to control the party
apparatus in order to promote their interests and take advantage of the social and
political disorder that accompanied the Civil War and Reconstruction. As a result, most leaders measured success by the election of public officials and the control of political appointments rather than by attending to the day to day affairs of the city’s poor, migrant population. African American desire for more economic opportunities, inclusion in the political process, and autonomy within their communities seemed far removed from politics in Memphis.

Made up of northern white radicals, a few white southerners, the city’s antebellum free black and former slave population along with black migrants, the Republican Party in Memphis represented a diverse constituency. The Party was loosely held together by members’ shared desire to control political offices, patronage, and a liberal egalitarian interest in maintaining Reconstruction policies. While factionalism was common among white Republicans, contests over political offices and patronage often exposed political divisions between white and black Republicans.\textsuperscript{16} White Republicans supported black enfranchisement, but rarely recognized African Americans as independent political actors. Instead, they envisioned a party supported by a black electorate under their leadership and tutelage. Their dependence on an electorate composed of men they considered inferior and socially unequal produced constant frustration among party leaders.\textsuperscript{17} Lacking support among white Memphians, Republican factions were forced to compete for black voters to ensure electoral success. Barbour Lewis complained frequently about the unwillingness of potential black voters to follow established party leaders’ directives. In anticipation of state elections in the fall of 1868, Lewis lamented his failure to
mobilize African American voters because he lacked the resources and the “time to run after them and see to them.” “I could control them,” he wrote, “if I had the time.”

Whereas Republican rhetoric expressed support for universal citizenship rights, few white Republicans believed black southerners were capable of exercising self-government. Nothing exposed these divisions between white and black Republicans publicly more than African American political leaders desire to hold federal appointments and elected offices. “From the top of the political order to the bottom,” Eric Foner writes, “blacks initially received a lower share of offices than their proportion of the party’s electorate warranted.” This especially applied to Memphis. Even though the state of Tennessee passed a law allowing African Americans to hold public office in 1868, white Republicans controlled party nominations and patronage during Reconstruction. And, when black political organizers began demanding federal posts and elected offices local party leaders resisted. “Our colored people,” Barbour Lewis wrote, “ought to be willing to wait awhile until they are competent, but they are not.” As a consequence of black political leaders’ desire for a larger public role, party leaders struggled to maintain unity. Lewis went on to write, “it requires real work to lead them right.”

While local Republicans competed for patronage and elected office, the state Republican Party divided over how to maintain political legitimacy. To ensure political survival and gain support among white southerners some Republicans began favoring a policy of reconciliation with state Democrats. When Governor Brownlow
resigned from office to take a seat in the United States senate on February 25, 1869, Dewitt Senter, member of the State Senate and acting governor, began advocating universal suffrage and replacing registration officials with men who were more lenient towards franchise restrictions to win a special election held that summer. These policies divided the Republican Party. On June 24, Edward Shaw and others in Memphis gathered to protest Governor Senter’s actions. Already struggling for political space, the restoration of voting privileges to white southerners threatened to remove African Americans from politics all together. By allowing former Confederates to vote Senter easily won the election, while at the same time allowing Conservative-Democrats to secure a decisive majority in the Tennessee General Assembly. As a consequence of this election, Democrats began a concerted effort of repealing Radical legislation and restoring political power to white southern conservatives. With Tennessee effectively redeemed, the place of African Americans in public life became even more uncertain.

Now that ex-Confederates were returning to electoral politics, appointed positions and public office became more cherished among politicians. But, despite the Republican Party’s diminishing share of the electorate, white Republicans still remained reluctant to accept African Americans as political equals. Barbour Lewis waited until the last moment to support Edward Shaw’s successful candidacy for County Commissioner in the spring of 1869. African American politicians also pressured party leaders for a more substantial share of the political rewards and demanded that federal posts be offered to them for their role in ensuring electoral
success. Republican failures to meet these expectations further divided white Republicans from their black political counterparts. Even though Lewis pledged to appoint black political leaders to important federal posts, African Americans were often given minor positions or excluded all together. Hannibal C. Carter, for example, a former Union soldier and leading political organizer, promised the position of assessor for the U.S. Internal Revenue Department in West Tennessee saw the position given to a white Republican instead, while he became deputy assessor.  

Some of the city’s most established and prosperous black citizens led the movement to challenge the Republican Party establishment. Represented by members of the antebellum free black community, former soldiers, and political activists, the political class had taken an early leadership role during the Civil War and Reconstruction and grown increasingly dissatisfied with white Republicans unwillingness to uphold principles of racial equality. In preparation for the upcoming 1870 state congressional election black and white party leaders divided over the Republican nominee. On September 27, 1870, a delegation of black Republicans held a political gathering at Collwell’s Hall. Colwell’s Hall had long served as a meeting place for influential long-term residents. Here Edward Shaw criticized Republicans unwillingness to recognize black voters as political and social equals. During a speech, he called attention to the “trickery” used “by the white men of the Republican Party” to advance their political interests at the expense of black voters. As a result, he asked those present at the meeting to teach white Republicans a “lesson.” Shaw targeted his political ire at Colonel William J. Smith, the Republican nominee. At a
meeting in October, Shaw charged, Smith was a “thief” and accused him of robbing “the colored people.”

Personal animosity between the two men existed since the county elections of 1869. Smith resisted Shaw’s candidacy for County Commissioner because, one source was quoted as saying, “he [Smith] likes you [Shaw] as well as anybody else, but he don’t think a nigger should run for office.”

Independents held a separate nomination convention in preparation for the upcoming elections in Shelby County. Prominent members of the antebellum community and business owners, such as Joseph Clouston and Robert Church, nominated Edward Shaw as a candidate for the United States Congress. Even though Shaw appealed directly to former slave’s collective desire for self-determination he also had strong ties to the antebellum community. A relative newcomer, arriving just before the war, Shaw lived next door to Clouston, an antebellum free black and one’s of the city’s wealthiest residents. Personal associations and economic status clearly helped strengthen political alliances among these established entrepreneurs. But, more importantly, this small cadre of long-term residents and political activists identified politics as one way to eliminate racial prejudices. They fought for civil rights and challenged Republican Party leadership for a more prominent role in political affairs from the very beginning of Reconstruction. Church, for example, found himself at odds with authorities several times for failing to accept discriminatory treatment. In December of 1867, Church refused to stand on the platform outside a streetcar, a common practice in the American South after the Civil War, and was arrested. Established black
Memphians were also among a group of activists who gathered to demand equal accommodations in public transportation several months after Church’s arrest.\(^{32}\)

The political contest between the black political elite and white Republicans, therefore, centered not only on African Americans’ desire to hold elected offices, but also underscored black Memphians’ criticism of the failure of Republicans to work aggressively towards civil rights. Described as a “bright mulatto,” and considered an “able, forcible” and “eloquent speaker,” Edwards Shaw toured the Eighth Congressional District speaking out against the Republican Party for its lack of commitment to racial equality in his campaign for congressman.\(^{33}\) At a political gathering in Brownsville, just outside of Memphis, he charged that while it was “the policy of the Democrats to carry slavery into all the states of the Union” Republicans were opposed only “to its extension, and wanted to keep it in the states where it existed.”\(^{34}\) More often, however, he expressed dissatisfaction with Republican leaders’ exclusion of African Americans from the party’s decision making process. Shaw claimed that the relationship between white Republican politicians and the majority black voters was based on exploitation. “This opponent [Colonel William J. Smith] of mine has for several years made his living out of the colored people,” Shaw asserted.\(^{35}\) Privately party leaders confirmed many of independent black Republicans assertions. They believed African Americans were not fit for self-government. In a letter to John Eaton, Barbour Lewis, related the outcome of the “bogus” delegation may “prove troublesome.” He deplored the possibility of a “black man’s candidate” for “the ignorant and feeble minded blacks.” Yet despite the challenges this independent ticket
presented to Republican Party unity, Lewis took solace in the fact that these political activists had few supporters.\textsuperscript{36}

Election returns revealed black politicians inability to win support from the majority working-class migrant neighborhoods. In the Congressional race Democrats easily won the election; however, the divided Republican ticket had little to do with the results. In an election where 4,895 individuals voted for the conservative candidate only 1,802 voters cast ballots for either Republican candidate. Democratic victories in the congressional election demonstrated the significance of the restoration of voting privileges to ex-Confederates and the failure of the Republican Party to appeal to white Southerners. The election also revealed how black voters approached factionalism on the local level. A decline in Republican turnout from previous elections suggests a lack of interests among potential black voters in a strictly partisan election. And, even though Shaw was well known among black Memphians and had been elected to public office, he managed to garner merely 167 votes.\textsuperscript{37} The outcome was undoubtedly disappointing to the small cadre of political activists that had been looking to declare independence from the Republican establishment. It also suggested their alienation from the working-class migrant communities. While black politicians regularly spoke in front of audiences at neighborhood churches and community gatherings, few were active in the city’s mutual aid societies or independent black churches. In Memphis, not only did the black political elite’s social distance from the formerly enslaved migrant community limit their ability to mobilize the black
electorate, but their focus on elected office and civil rights failed to shape the political debate around substantive issues needed to raise community interest.\textsuperscript{38}

Despite the apparent weakness of the Republican Party, elite conservatives were unable to take full advantage of the political situation. Composed of native-born, antebellum elite merchants and property-holders, aspiring entrepreneurs, along with working-class and middle-class immigrants and a few black conservatives the Democratic Party in Memphis was a loosely constructed coalition of competing interests. Similar to Republicans, Democrats competed amongst themselves over who was nominated for office and received the political rewards. Elite Memphians were forced to battle for power with an inchoate middle-class constituency composed of native-born conservatives and German and Irish immigrants within the Democratic Party.\textsuperscript{39} As a result, while Democrats were solidifying their political control over other regions of the state, internal disputes among Memphian conservatives produced disaffected Democrats, led to frequent electoral defeats, and contributed to the continued political marginalization of the white upper-class.

More so than the native-born working-class, the pre-war ruling elite witnessed the rise of a new political class of foreign born voters and public officials during the Civil War era. In the 1850s, Memphis was the fastest growing city in the nation and much of this growth was the result of the arrival of immigrants, which accounted for 30\% of the population in 1860. The most substantial growth occurred within the Irish population which increased from 745 to 4,298 between 1850 and 1860. And, while the majority were employed as unskilled laborers by the local railroads, a portion were
part of an aspiring middle-class working as grocery store proprietors, saloon keepers, and public officials.\(^{40}\) The democratic transformations that accompanied the Civil War allowed the new immigrant communities to carve out political space in the electoral arena.\(^{41}\) By 1866, the mayor, recorder, and nine members of the city council were Irish born. As a result, while ex-Confederates were removed from electoral politics, many long-time residents complained that the city’s “best men” were marginalized by the property-less class of Irish immigrants. Commenting on this political environment, William F. Iriwn, a practicing physician in Memphis, charged that, “the voice of respectable people has not been heard; the elections have all been controlled by the Irish.”\(^{42}\)

Political discontent within both parties, therefore, contained the potential to redraw the political landscape. German and Irish voters had always been willing to shift their party allegiance for political gain in Memphis; however, in the 1860s most foreign-born voters supported the Democrat-Conservative Party. The re-enfranchisement of ex-Confederates accentuated divisions within the Democratic Party as various constituencies vied for patronage and elected office.\(^{43}\) As factionalism became more visible in the immediate post-redemption era it often highlighted immigrant communities’ disillusionment with partisan politics. On February 7, 1870, for example, a number of German residents held a mass meeting to form a “close community society for political purposes feeling that they were slighted in the recent Municipal elections.” Leaders of the “German movement” called for the elimination of political parties and criticized the strictly partisan battle for power.
among Confederates, Republicans, and the Irish.\textsuperscript{44} Most likely their grievances stemmed from the marginalization of community concerns from local politics.

Kathleen Berkeley in her study on the city’s foreign population notes prior to the emergence of this coalition German efforts to secure financial support for a private German school had been repeatedly denied. Even though German representatives were repeatedly elected to the school board, community leaders were unable to change public policy.\textsuperscript{45}

This set the stage for new political alliances. A coalition of disgruntled German and Irish immigrants organized with black and white Republicans in preparation for the upcoming county election. Lacking a dominant voting majority, white Republican leaders looked to take advantage of these social divisions among native white and ethnic conservatives. Barbour Lewis began working with Irishmen John Loague and Pat Riley to maintain the party’s political relevance post-redemption. Lucien Eaton, in a letter to his brother John Eaton a couple of days before the county election, made note of this development. “Lewis is alive with schemes to assist John Loague by electing his deputy Riley,” he wrote, by attempting to fuse “the Irish and negro vote.”\textsuperscript{46} Irish conservatives’ feeling of alienation with the Democratic Party in the past undoubtedly made this coalition more viable. After the election, the Memphis \textit{Daily Avalanche}’s observations revealed the effect of this movement on traditional party loyalties. “Party Lines Bent, Battered, Bruised, Broken, and Busted,” the paper’s headlines read. Despite redemption in Tennessee, the coalition successfully defeated the Democratic Party. The reason for this defeat, the \textit{Avalanche} observed,
was because “our Irish fellow-citizens stuck bands with the Germans and negroes and elected their favorites to office.”

For most Republicans they viewed the alliance as a partisan opportunity to extend its political legitimacy by challenging old party loyalties. To many the party’s association with nativism and Know-Nothings made this alliance improbable. Prior to the Civil War, anti-Irish sentiment contributed to the election of Know-nothing candidates. As a consequence of this political climate, Irish voters most readily identified with the Democrat Party. Even though many Irish residents refused to join the Confederate Army and signed the loyalty oath to the Union during the Civil War, their sense of alienation from Republicans and racial animosity towards black southerners meant they operated primarily within the Democratic Party. The alliance weakened this historic relationship. P. J. Mulvihill, a coalition leader observed, that the “Irishmen of Memphis had broken the shackles which had so long bound them to the Democratic Party.” And it gave new life to the Republican Party post-redeemption. The outcome, Barbour Lewis wrote to John Eaton, reflected “a great victory over the Rebs [Rebels] and Democrats.” More importantly Lewis continued, he intended “to keep up the alliance till after our judicial election,” and hoped that it might “last much longer.”

More so than partisanship, these alliances had the potential to reshape public debate in Memphis. Kathleen Berkeley argues that in response to the coalition’s success German community activists made additional political demands. Leaders called for a change in the public school curriculum by appointing a teacher capable of
teaching a German language course in high school. This request was eventually approved by the school board. By organizing across party lines German leaders successfully made community concerns a central part of the local political discourse and solidified their place in the new social order. In the coalition’s aftermath, the “German movement” remained a persistent threat to the strength of the Democratic Party; however, evidence suggests most German residents chose to continue supporting the local Democratic Party. On July 13, 1871, German political leaders met and dedicated themselves to “conservative principles” and officially pronounced themselves members of the Democratic Party. It is not clear why German residents were less willing to support additional independent movements. Certainly, one reason may be because German Americans did not suffer from the same racial biases as Irish or African Americans and were more easily able to integrate into native white society. Most likely, however, their ability to successfully use politics to elevate their concerns to the center of public debate minimized the need to continue supporting independent alliances.

It was this political environment that shaped the substance of political discourse in the post-redeemption era. Even though radical Republicans were removed from control of southern states, electoral politics remained competitive on the local level. Similar to other southern regions, factionalism and third party coalitions were quite common in Memphis. Most scholars have used race and class to examine the trajectory and consequences of these alliances. Class grievances and political disillusionment among working-class whites provided black southerners with
opportunities to maintain their influence in public life. In the end, Eric Foner and others conclude that the politics of race and class foiled attempts to create lasting biracial alliances. While this interpretation goes a long way to explaining the solidification of white supremacy in the South, it fails to adequately explain how these shifting political alliances were representative of former slaves’ sense of belonging in their local environment and expressions of collective consciousness. Marginalized and excluded from the political decision making process, African American migrant communities responded to issues that promised to give them more autonomy over their daily lives and recognized the social integrity of their neighborhoods. By examining how potential black voters approached these coalitions it is possible to see how African Americans’ corporate interests and political understandings of place helped move neighborhood concerns to the center of public debate. At the same time, these coalitions provide insight into the compromises elite southerners were willing to make in response to black agency. Similar to other southern conservatives, elite Memphians constructed a political language based on what scholars refer to as the meritorious concept of the “best man” to solidify their exclusive right to control local affairs. This middle ground, however, was always contested and demonstrates the ways race and class boundaries were bent and molded, but never broken, to cast unlikely alliances.

In Memphis, the end of Republican rule in Tennessee escalated struggles over the substance of political debate and the relationship between place and autonomy in
local communities. White southerners remained reluctant to accept former slaves’ efforts to carve out political space. Conservatives made modest appeals to potential new voters after black enfranchisement. But while a few black Memphians openly supported the Conservative Party no significant union emerged between white southerners and former slaves. Instead, most conservatives refused to recognize African Americans new role in public life. C. S. Cameron, for example, a leader of the Conservative Party, proclaimed his support for a “white man’s government” and the need for black southerners to “take back seats” in the political arena. Other elite conservatives shared similar views. Speaking at the same conservative meeting, Samuel P. Walker, an affluent white Memphian and political officeholder, saw no contradiction with maintaining a Government of the mythical “Anglo-Saxon Race” that provided equal justice “to those other people.” Americans had traditionally considered political participation a privilege making it easy for elite southerners to separate political rights from legal protections. Only tax-payers and property-holders elite conservatives argued should be allowed to exercise political rights in the public sphere.

In order to reestablish their exclusive claim to public authority conservatives organized a taxpayers’ association to monitor and pressure local and state political leaders for municipal reforms. Composed of members of the antebellum elite, former planters, wealthy merchants, prominent attorneys, and railroad investors, these conservatives blamed their individual tax burdens and the city’s escalating debt on the social and political transformations that accompanied Reconstruction. In April of
1871, a report by the newly formed citizen’s union charged “unwise legislation, extravagance, corruption, and defaulting offices with irresponsible bonds men, have squandered our resources, impaired the credit of the county and well nigh destroyed its power to meet its present and urgent liabilities and its current expenses.”  As noted earlier in this chapter, the city’s escalating debt threatened the financial solvency of the municipal administration. These reformers failed to mention, however, that many of the bonds and expenditures were supported and advocated by its members. Instead, the reform movement underscored elite Memphians unwillingness to recognize the property-less class right to participate in local governance.

Still marginalized in local politics, elite Memphians questioned the social and political legitimacy of the post-Civil War order. In their efforts to gain public support, elite Memphians regularly criticized Radical Republicans for the increased financial burdens placed upon the city of Memphis. “The sum levied upon the city and county by all the ingenious machinery invented of late years, nominally for the good government” William Greenlaw, a long-time resident of Memphis and member of the reform movement noted, was really “for the robbery of the people.” Even though the local Republican Party exercised limited influence in municipal affairs, radical Republicans proved to be an effective scapegoat for the city’s financial problems. To make their argument more effective elite Memphians often connected they city’s escalating debt to the increased financial burdens placed upon individual property-holders during Reconstruction. Greenlaw charged that while Republicans controlled that state government “more than five thousand men in this city and county were
preying upon the industry and toil of the tax burdened people.” But, while Radical Republicans were blamed for creating the city’s emerging economic crisis, elite Memphians were even more troubled by the expansion of the franchise that allowed the entry of new voters into the political arena that they believed were incapable of self-government. Greenlaw’s comments suggest how race and class influenced elite Memphians view of the public order. “Great numbers of ignorant people,” he complained, ran the ward meetings and chose “corrupt politicians.”

Instead, elite Memphians proposed only the city’s “best citizens” should be allowed to govern and influence public policy. In the spring of 1872, this taxpayers association was organized into the Citizen’s Reform Association. Also known as the people’s protective association, the organization represented an elite understanding of citizenship that excluded African Americans and working-class minorities from public life. This race and class ideology influenced the positions expressed by the organization from its inception. Its members included prominent taxpayers and property-holders who had the “[best] welfare of the community in mind” they argued.

Lacking control of city affairs and the local Democratic Party, the organization operated as an independent political interest group designed to control public debate and restore elite influence in local matters. They passed a series of resolutions calling for the Tennessee legislature to enact laws to reduce tax burdens, place restraints on the authority of officeholders, and abolish the number of public offices. Members promised to support only those candidates for legislative office who supported their policies. As a result, by supporting a reduction in the number of

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elected offices and deferring authority away to the conservative controlled state legislator, reformers hoped to eliminate some of the democratic excesses of the post-Civil War social order.\textsuperscript{59}

The creation of the reform association, therefore, highlighted social divisions between not only Republicans and Democrats, but also among the aspiring middle-class over the merits of a popular democracy. Working-class and middle-class Democrats challenged elite contention that wealth and property guaranteed an ethical electorate devoted to the public good. Responding to the reform movement, the local conservative press noted “it was the same saloon keepers, hack-drivers, dray-drivers, Irish and Dutch,” criticized by wealthy property-holders that “carried the musket and bared their breasts” against northern Republicans. Contrary to elite opinion, the editors of the Memphis \textit{Daily Appeal} argued by taking such an interest in electoral politics, the working-class native and foreign born electorate limited the influence of the local Republican Party during Reconstruction. Rather, this editorial suggested, elite Memphians were incapable and unwilling to stand up for the public interests. While reformers, the editorial continued, “always have plenty of money for peace,” they never had anything for war nor did they ever show up on Election Day.\textsuperscript{60} As a result of these public criticisms, reformers had to maintain a delicate balance between race and class divisions in Memphis.

Regardless of their best efforts, elite conservatives remained unable to dictate political events. Between 1872 and 1874 a new coalition supported primarily by African Americans and Irish immigrants transformed the political landscape by
elevating the social and economic concerns of former slaves to the center of public debate. African American support for a union with ethnic minorities extended beyond the city limits. In March of 1870, at the Tennessee Colored Man’s Convention, delegates encouraged cooperation with the immigrant population. While this prospective alliance never materialized on the state level, in Memphis, it became a political reality with John Loague’s mayoral campaigns in 1872 and 1874. Loague, an Irish immigrant, arrived in New York City in 1848, moving south to Memphis in 1860. Once in Memphis, he was elected to a number of public offices including the school board, tax collector of privileges, and served as a delegate from West Tennessee to the Constitutional Convention in 1865. More so than by focusing solely on the mayor’s office, the coalition’s success derived from its emphasis on cooperation, power sharing, and attention to local concerns. The coalition’s message of inclusion stood in stark contrast to elite views of citizenship and the partisan infighting that marginalized community issues in the past.

In fact, the coalition promised to provide African Americans with an increased public role as legitimate members of the social order. By organizing political tickets with black and foreign born community representatives it appealed to the long-standing grievances of the black political elite. African American exclusion from public offices remained a continuous issue within the Republican Party. A political gathering in the summer of 1872 at the Sons of Ham hall underscored local complaints. “We the colored Republicans of Shelby County, and the state of Tennessee,” leaders charged, “do not believe that, we have been treated with that
respect that is due us by white Republicans.” Those in attendance demanded state and national patronage, asserting, “it is our right to claim, at least, some of the humble positions under the Government, through Representatives.” Not only were elected and appointed offices highly coveted positions that provided economic opportunities, but public office symbolized their place as equal members of the community. The coalition, therefore, appealed to disaffected black Republicans by constructing an inclusive political ticket based upon community cooperation. Conservatives noted with dismay, in the 1874 city elections, “we have the Irish, the German, the Italian, the negro, the American, and the French.”

But, more importantly, the coalition’s promise to integrate the city’s police force appealed to the collective concerns of the formerly enslaved migrant communities. In the past, the longstanding coercive relationship that existed between enslaved black southerners and the white militias and public authorities manifested a constant source of contestation over the boundaries of slaveholders’ authority within the black community. Slave patrols enforced the laws and social customs that circumscribed the movements of southern slaves. To maintain slave discipline patrols often relied upon the threat of physical force and engaged in open confrontations with enslaved people. Patrols harassed slaves traveling on official plantation business, captured runaways, and disrupted social gatherings. While sometimes slaves openly challenged the authority of neighborhood patrols, the laws and customs white southerners put in place to supervise African American behavior served as a constant reminder of the challenges they faced to protect the integrity of their communities.
In the immediate post-emancipation era, boundaries around property rights were drawn more tightly to reaffirm race and class distinctions. White southerners showed limited interest in recognizing the rights that accompanied former slaves’ new legal status as free people. And, although the presence of federal authorities and condensed populations of black southerners in urban areas provided additional safety to former slaves from violence, the management of former slaves’ behavior remained in the hands of individuals reluctant to recognize their independence. In Memphis, similar to most nineteenth century American cities, local police offices expressed limited interest in the well being of those living outside their communities. As discussed in previous chapters, incidents of physical confrontations between Irish policemen, black soldiers, and migrants were common in the days leading up to the Memphis Massacre. And despite national attention the massacre received, the federal government held no one responsible. Elite Memphians demonstrated a lack of interests in ensuring former slaves received equal protection before the law as well. While they favored passage of the Metropolitan police bill and the professionalization of the local force, they did so Altina Waller suggests, not out of a concern for the rights of the working and migration classes, but rather to ensure property in the downtown business district received adequate protection from the property-less classes in Memphis.66

Southern conservative’s immediately noted the coalition’s potential to transform notions of race, class, and place in the public sphere. Its willingness to support black candidates for elected office and appoint black police officers to patrol
city streets threatened race and class hierarchies by legitimizing the concerns of black neighborhoods. In an attempt to minimize the political efficacy of the coalition, the conservative press focused attention on its inclusion of black voters. The *Appeal* argued Loague’s mayoral campaign was attempting to “put Ireland to bed with Africa” by sharing the ticket with black Memphians. As a result in the 1872 municipal election, white voters were called upon to support the conservative candidate, John Johnson, or declare themselves “in favor of Loague and negro councilmen.” But, even more concerning, the coalition’s intention to integrate the city’s police force had the potential to redraw the boundaries of public life. White Memphians viewed this as a “disgrace” and attempted to rally conservative support around their objection to using black policemen to protect persons and property. Conservative editorials urged that, “if people of Memphis would prevent the inexplicable chance of seeing negro policemen strolling upon their beats, they must give a candid and earnest support to John Johnson.”

But while conservative outrage at the potential of black politicians and policemen clearly reflected racial prejudices shared by white southerners throughout the region, these election contests provide even more insight on neighborhood politics. The press followed registration numbers closely. In 1870, a change in the city’s charter required the re-registration of eligible voters, and while African Americans accounted for less than forty-percent of the electorate the racial demographics in several wards made voter turn-out essential to political success. As a result, African American political behavior in the fourth, fifth, sixth, seventh, ninth, and tenth wards
were reported on regularly. These areas were located on the periphery of the
downtown business district and represented the dispersed residential patterns of black
Memphians. Calls for whites to register were made repeatedly in the days leading up
to the 1874 municipal election, representing, the Daily Appeal charged, the “duty of
the hour.” The press made this urgent appeal in direct response to the high level of
community interest exhibited in black neighborhoods. Conservative editorials
complained, African Americans were “frantically rushing to the office of the registrar
in various wards, and by next Monday next every colored voter entitled to a
certificate, and many who are not qualified voters, will have registration papers in
their pockets,” in preparation for election day.68 As a consequence of these events,
community battles over the social divisions of power were made visible.

An examination of electoral politics reveals how elite Memphians and former
slaves contested for space on the local level.69 In those neighborhoods where African
Americans exhibited a strong sense of community blacks expressed a consistent
interest in municipal politics. This was true not only in the southern periphery where a
high percentage of former slaves lived, but also in the northern edges of the city where
residential activities, leisure interests, and cooperative associations undoubtedly
helped establish a feeling of connectedness and long-term investment in their
communities. Registration totals for the municipal elections between 1872 and 1874
affirm this political dynamic. African American registration numbers fluctuated,
however, the seventh, eight, and tenth wards contained some of the most consistent
registration returns.70 The majority of black churches and mutual aid societies were
clustered in neighborhoods throughout these areas. Similarly, in north Memphis, the ninth ward maintained the second most consistent registration totals for African Americans dispersed throughout the city. Members of the Middle Baptist Church and chapters of the Social Benevolent Societies, and the Sons and Daughters of Zion, established communal ties in these areas and exhibited a persistent interest in politics.

Underlying the political discourse on race and class, therefore, community conflicts over who belonged in the public sphere took place on the ground level. This was especially apparent in the southern periphery. Located on the outskirts of the downtown business district, this area, Altina Waller noted, represented one of the city’s most diverse region radically changed by Civil War era migrations. Many former slaves established residences in neighborhoods within the seventh ward. As a result, by 1870, African Americans accounted for forty-nine percent of its population. Residents shared the same city streets and business establishments and fellowship in one of the neighborhood churches or benevolent societies located in close proximity. At the same time, these residents shared public spaces with a large portion of the city’s Irish immigrants and elite Memphians. Almost twenty percent of Memphis’ Irish immigrant population lived in the seventh ward; many of them part of the aspiring middle class and participants in the mob violence that transpired during the Memphis Massacre. On the other hand, a number of elite Memphians lived in the same ward. They shared common experiences in the city’s antebellum history as former slave owners, members of the Confederate Army, and wealthy merchants and landowners. To them their daily encounters with former slaves in public space and their active role
in local politics served as a constant reminder of their loss of power in the public sphere. These residents included William B. Greenlaw, J. T. Busby, and others who represented some of the most vocal opponents of the coalition and supporters of the citizen’s reform movement.\textsuperscript{71}

As a consequence of the dispersed residential patterns of black Memphians, immigrants, and native-born white Southerners, elite Memphians’ struggles to secure their exclusive claim to public authority were not surprising. Even though ex-Confederates regained the franchise, elections remained closely contested. Therefore, African American political activity produced a great deal of anxiety among white Memphians. Conservative editorials often noted black Memphians persistent interests in ward politics in comparison to white Southerners. In the 1871 municipal election, almost every registered voter in the sixth ward participated. “They all came all save one,” the \textit{Daily Appeal} observed, while only fifty percent of white voters showed up at the polls. This meant a high participation of voters conservatives considered incapable of self-governance. Editors complained about the lack of interest exhibited by taxpayers, who should demonstrate the most interest in local politics. Similar complaints were made about other contests as well. In the same city election, black voters almost elected an African American to the school board from the seventh ward. And in subsequent elections, this ward became the most hotly contested. It represented the “banner ward” of the city conservatives noted. As a result, community response to the coalition received detailed attention. On eve of the 1872 municipal election the \textit{Daily Appeal} observed, “most of the negroes have registered within the last three day,” and
they feared, planned on making “a clean sweep” by demonstrating “their entire strength.”

Elite Memphians stepped up their efforts to reassert their exclusive claim to the public sphere in response to this political activity. While few affluent Memphians ran for elected office, their struggles to influence political events were quite visible. They regularly made public appeals for prospective candidates. Not surprisingly, only in those wards with more homogenous communities were they able to achieve positive results. The challenges they faced in other neighborhoods, however, led elite Memphians to take a more active role. To white Memphians the strength of the coalition in the seventh ward symbolized their continued marginalization from community affairs. It was most likely this political reality that led William B. Greenlaw, an affluent antebellum Memphian and avid supporter of the citizen’s reform movement, to run for local office in the 1872 municipal election. By voting for Greenlaw, conservatives strived to reaffirm the racial boundaries of public life. They viewed his election as a repudiation of the coalition’s willingness to integrate the city’s police force, appoint black officials, and support African American candidates for office. “If any voter in the seventh ward should commit the egregious wrong and folly of voting for Loague,” the Daily Appeal charged, “there is some little chance for his forgiveness in the world to come if he will make amends for the crime by voting for William B. Greenlaw.” But, despite name recognition and economic influence, elite Memphians had little say in local political matters. Two of the city’s first African
American councilmen were elected to office, easily defeating one member of the antebellum elite in Memphis.\textsuperscript{75}

Their actions demonstrated their continued inability to restore race and class hierarchies post-redemption. Not only did the active participation of black communities limit their political influence, but their marginalization within the Democratic Party prevented elite Memphians from dictating the boundaries of public life. While upper-class conservatives adamantly opposed John Loague, the coalition’s candidate for mayor, for example, evidence suggests they were just as opposed to the Democratic incumbent. In response to John Johnson’s election in 1870, elite Memphians questioned his citizenship status. A petition, later withdrawn, demanded evidence of his birth-place and whether or not he was a naturalized citizen.\textsuperscript{76} To many native-born southern conservatives Johnson’s election symbolized the consequences of popular democracy that placed local affairs in the hands of individuals without a vested interest in the community. As a consequence, elite Memphians tried to regain control of the local Democratic Party. In preparation for the upcoming 1872 municipal election some of the city’s most established residents gathered to nominate a candidate for mayor. According to the \textit{Daily Appeal}, the participants represented some of the city’s “best citizens,” who were “true Democrats and the largest taxpayers.” But, despite the social and economic influence these labels implied, their candidate received little support from the conservative community at-large.\textsuperscript{77}

What began, therefore, as a tax-payer’s reform initiative designed to hold elected officials accountable to elite standards of good government developed into an
independent political movement aimed at restoring affluent white Southerners exclusive right to control public debate. Elite Memphians continued to work politically to enforce racial and class boundaries in the seventh ward. In the 1873 municipal election, for example, J. T. Busby, a wealthy business-owner, ran for alderman. A number of well-known Memphians, including W. B. Greenlaw who ran unsuccessfully the previous year, supported his candidacy. His election along with others, conservatives noted, represented the defeat of “Johnson men” and suggest elite Memphians were beginning to reclaim control of conservative politics in Memphis. In the meantime, conservative criticisms of Mayor Johnson’s inability to deal with the city’s escalating municipal debt escalated. And, even more damaging to the city’s financial solvency, a devastating yellow fever epidemic spread throughout the city in the summer of 1873. Many residents fled the city, while an estimated two thousand Memphians died. These events affirmed elite Memphians long-held beliefs that only the city’s “best citizens” should govern local affairs. Soon after many of the city’s wealth citizens returned after the yellow fever epidemic, some of the city’s leading advocates for municipal reform held a mass meeting. Not only was the epidemic “injurious to the best interests of the city,” they argued, but it demonstrated that a number of political offices needed to be reduced along with the salaries of elected officials. Those in attendance nominated J. T. Busby for mayor and established the People’s Ticket for the upcoming city election.

Supported by members of the citizen’s reform association, the independent ticket represented the continued efforts by elite Memphians to remove African
Americans and property-less whites’ from civil and political power. Since the Civil War and Reconstruction, elite Memphians had looked for ways to reassert their exclusive claim to local governance. At the meeting, Nathan Bedford Forrest, a former slave trader and Confederate General, best expressed elite frustrations. Forrest noted, “we have suffered defeat after defeat, and will suffer it unless we harmonize here tonight.”

The 1874 municipal election, therefore, served as a referendum on whether or not the city’s “best citizens” should be able to dictate who belonged in the public sphere.

But, whereas the early citizen’s reform movement made explicit references to upholding class distinctions and the illegitimacy of the post-Civil War political order, the People’s Ticket expressed some recognition of the merits of popular politics to appeal to the city’s diverse electorate. “Why this cry of nationality and race,” the *Daily Appeal* asked. In response to the coalition composed of African American and Irish-American communities, conservatives deployed language based on democratic principles in order to eschew race and class distinctions. “Every man who can vote here is an American citizen,” editors argued. This applied not only to the foreign-born, but also former slaves. The *Daily Appeal* continued, “We must not know any Irish, German, French, Italians, or negroes, but American citizens, in this municipal contest.” While this moderate message of inclusion reflected the ideal sentiments of a universal democracy, elite Memphians were reacting to the dynamics of neighborhood ward politics that allowed African Americans, immigrant communities, and property-less whites to dictate political affairs at their expense. Supporters of the
People’s Ticket continued to express long-standing grievances about their marginalization from power. They called upon voters to take Memphis “out of the hands of the political wire-pullers” and ward politicians. And they challenged the Irish, German, and African American population not to support this “spotted ticket.” Rather supporters claimed, “this is 1873 and voters can think for themselves.”

Instead, elite Memphians made veiled references to their self-proclaimed role as the city’s “best citizens” by drawing upon recent history to reinforce community boundaries over race, class, and place. Less than ten years removed from the Memphis Massacre, popular understandings of the violence as a neighborhood conflict resulting from social and economic tensions between black soldiers, former slaves, and Irish policemen and working-class draymen provided an effective medium to weaken public support for the coalition. Considered among elite southerners as the result of placing public authority under the control of the “more inferior classes of society,” reference to the Memphis Massacre served two purposes. First, conservatives were able to use race to exploit neighborhood conflicts that existed between Irish and African Americans in the past. Secondly, by emphasizing these tensions elite Memphians underscored their long-held beliefs that political power belonged in the hands of “the property-holders, men of business, and those regarded as the more orderly part of the population of Memphis.”

As a result, the 1874 municipal election turned into a political debate over race and historical memory. Opponents of the coalition focused on the inclusion of T.M. Winters, the former Shelby County Sheriff implicated by the congressional committee.
for his role in forming a posse that became a mob during the Memphis Massacre, on the ticket for elected office. At a conservative mass meeting, participants charged Sheriff Winters deserved blame not only for the violence that took place during the massacre, but also for police officers continued poor treatment of African Americans. “Had he manifested half the spirit,” critics charged, “the riots could have been stopped and the police, composed of the Irish ring, would not have assaulted and beaten you for the last six or seven years.” Throughout the campaign, conservatives drew upon the contentious racial history between Irish and African Americans in order to weaken community support for the coalition. “Colored voters remember with vivid distinctiveness the Memphis riots,” supporters of the People’s Ticket claimed, continuing “they know that the Irish are their irreconcilable enemies.” These claims were clearly designed to bring to light neighborhood tensions from the past. And, in an attempt to appeal to the city’s black communities, conservatives charged Irish Americans with duplicity. Critics of the coalition proposed, supporters were merely disaffected Democrats who for political advantages will claim to be Republicans to African Americans, but at the same time, “in South Memphis, to their Irish friends, will claim how they deceived the Republicans.”

Although references to the Memphis Massacre clearly demonstrated conservative attempts to exploit racial tensions in order to divide the electorate, mention of this event actually served to affirm elite contention that only the city’s “best citizens” should govern local affairs. To most conservatives the massacre demonstrated the consequences of removing civil and political power from elite
southerners and placing it in the hands of men incapable of self-government. These views were best expressed in the minority report of the congressional committee investigating the massacre. By disenfranchising “men of property, men of businesses, and that class regarded as the more intelligent and better portion of society in the State,” conservatives charged that during Reconstruction Republicans placed in power individuals “prejudicial to the prosperity, peace, order, and security of society.”

The coalitions promise to integrate the police force, therefore, brought to the surface elite fears about placing authority in hands of individuals they believed incapable of policing their own neighborhoods. If the mayor made up “the fire and police department of half negroes and half Irish,” they predicted, “a feud will break out which will terminate in a mob equal to that of 1866.”

African American community leaders’ support of the coalition’s participatory democratic strategy, however, undercut conservative efforts to agitate racial tensions. Just days after the formation of the people’s ticket, supporters of a coalition government gathered to nominate candidates for the 1874 municipal election. While a number of whites attended the meeting, the Daily Appeal noted, the city’s “colored citizens largely predominated.” Led by the Independent Pole-Bearers benevolent society, the meeting reflected common characteristics of nineteenth century popular politics. The meeting was “lively” and began with a marching band and the Pole-Bearers leading a parade. To conservatives the neighborhood meetings were chaotic and represented the democratic excesses of community politics. The Daily Avalanche reported, the meeting place was “a jam” and the stage was crowded with whites and
blacks trying to get their voice heard. On the other hand, to those former slaves in attendance their inclusion in the political decision making process only served to affirm their place in the political order. As a result, neighborhood meetings frequently turned into an explicit repudiation of elite authority. Participants nominated John Loague, an Irishman for mayor, Fred Schaper, a German American for tax-collector, and Ed Shaw, an African American for wharfmaster. And they resolved to “oppose and protest against the ticket, put into the field calling itself a people’s ticket” based on its exclusive representation of “only a single element of this community.”

Coalition leaders instead asserted their own view of the city’s racial history that questioned elite intentions. For those ex-slaves involved in the massacre its legacy was much deeper than simply a conflict between two competing ethnic groups. Shaw, in his candidacy for Wharfmaster in 1874, utilized this narrative in his appeals to the black populace, by noting that while it had been stated that, “we (African Americans) were mobbed and our churches burned, and this mob was led by Irishmen,” it was, in fact, led by “an American.” He also pointed out that while there were “Irishmen in the mob,” there were also citizens of all classes in the mob.” This interpretation was much more in-tune with the multiple experiences of black migrants during the massacre who understood the attack as one in a series of struggles to limit their access to self-determination and a political order that recognized their rights as equal citizens.

Black politicians rejected elite assertions that only the city’s “best citizens” could ensure law and order, especially as it related to black communities. Shaw
reminded the black electorate that the majority of those supporting the people’s ticket opposed the presence of federal troops stationed in Memphis after the war. For white southerners, the presence of black soldiers policing city streets were a threat to the social order; however, former slaves shared different memories. Black soldiers were the only ones willing to come to the aid of migrant communities, often protecting them from confrontations with white residents and the local police. Drawing upon these memories, Shaw questioned whether or not elite Memphians had black neighborhood interests in mind when they implied only they could ensure peace and security. He referenced a petition submitted by elite Memphians just a few months prior to the Memphis Massacre. Many supporters of the People’s Party, he alluded, “wrote the President of the United States and told him they did not want the soldiers here any longer.” Such charges were designed to contradict claims that social control needed to be placed under the charge of elite Memphians. In fact, Shaw concluded, elite actions were designed “to create ill feeling and hatred once more among us.”

Migrant neighborhoods also shared their own stories about race relations between former slaves and southern conservatives. Rumors circulated in black communities that J. T. Busby, the people’s ticket mayoral candidate, participated in the raid at Fort Pillow. On April 12, 1864, General Nathan Bedford Forrest’s Calvary raided the Union garrison at Fort Pillow. Located just fifty miles north of Memphis, the majority of casualties were U.S. Colored troops who Union officials charged were killed indiscriminately in what amounted to a massacre. Among the casualties were soldiers from the 2nd U.S. Colored Light Artillery deployed from Memphis. While
historians continue to debate the exact order of events, contemporary accounts confirm northern charges that many of the soldiers attempting to surrender were massacred. Witnesses reported several victims were burned and women and children were killed contradicting white southerners’ paternalistic claim that only they offered protection to members of the plantation household. As a result of this evidence, “Remember Fort Pillow” became a rallying cry for African American soldiers and memory of this event resonated with black Memphians after the war. Former slaves undoubtedly viewed episodes of race conflicts through the prism of this recent history and the constant reference to the Memphis Massacre during the 1874 municipal election most likely served to remind black Memphians of other examples of indiscriminate violence directed towards black southerners. In addition, while evidence suggests J. T. Busby did not participate in the Fort Pillow Massacre, the visible participation of none other than Nathan Bedford Forrest in community politics certainly helped confirm former slaves’ speculation that the People’s Party had little interest in representing their concerns. As a consequence of these rumors, J. T. Busby attended black neighborhood meetings in order to reject these charges. Despite being commonly referred to as a “monster” by many, Busby argued at a community gathering in Zion hall in South Memphis, he did not participate in Fort Pillow Massacre. While these debates demonstrated how race and memory were contested, even more so they underscored local efforts to define the social boundaries of public life. African Americans remained unwilling to concede autonomy to elite conservatives and white Republicans alike. By the 1874 municipal election, high profile white
Republican leaders had distanced themselves from the coalition. In a letter to Reverend Morris Henderson of Beale Street Baptist Church, Barbour Lewis, the chairman of the Shelby County Republican Party, questioned whether or not John Loague was the appropriate candidate for mayor. More than likely, party officials were responding to their limited control over neighborhood politics. While Republicans first perceived the coalition’s formation as an opportunity to extend the party’s influence in Memphis, it actually led to its diminished presence in city elections. Evidence suggests that the coalition received a good deal of support in black communities despite party leaders’ opposition. In a letter to the Daily Appeal, one unidentified black Republican evinced this demand for self-determination. “The colored men don’t like to be treated in this manner,” he charged, “as they are free, they propose to have some influence in decision who shall lead.” Appeals to manhood were quite common in the political arena, as African Americans looked to claim their place as autonomous individuals in the private and public sphere; yet these assertions represented a larger struggle to protect the integrity of their communities. “No man can so far delude the colored people,” he continued, “as to compel them to support a candidate whose recommendation is not endorsed by the colored people.”

In the years following redemption, while the local Republican Party’s influence waned elite Memphians remained unable to solidify their authority in local politics. Despite the city’s “best citizens” efforts to the contrary, the coalition defeated the people’s ticket by relying on community support in Irish and African American neighborhoods. Not only did the coalition receive a number of votes from the
working-class Irish neighborhoods of north Memphis, but the ticket also had a strong electoral showing in south Memphis where former slaves had persistently demonstrated an interest in community politics. Commenting on the significance of this turn of events, the *Daily Appeal* noted, the defeat of Busby for mayor was the result of “open hostility, secret treachery, and the union of [the] Irish, Germans, and negroes.” As a result of this union, supporters elected John Loague as mayor, along with Edward Shaw as wharfmaster and four African Americans to city council. By appealing to voters’ desire for inclusion in the decision making process the coalition effectively used ward politics to redraw political boundaries. The election represented a repudiation of elite southerners’ view of citizenship that only property-holders and taxpayers should control the local social order. More importantly, municipal politics brought former slaves’ community concerns to light and demonstrated that only by recognizing African Americans place in the public sphere did the city’s “best citizens” stand to regain their voice in the political process.

Composed of competing interest groups, the coalition’s strength and weakness, however, depended on its ability to incorporate multiple voices and represent common goals and interests. African American councilmen moved quickly to ensure the current administration lived up to its promise to know “no nationality or color” in the appointment of public officials. African Americans had reason to doubt the mayor’s assurances. No African Americans were appointed to any of the city’s public offices immediately after the election and the mayor had yet to move forward with his
promise to appoint African Americans to the police department. In response, Joseph Clouston and Thomas Moon both made motions in city council calling upon the mayor to act in accordance with his campaign promises. Councilman Moon motion demanded that the mayor and the police board “appoint representatives on the police from all nationalities with out regard to creed or color.” The motion itself was indicative of African American political activist efforts for civil rights; however, more importantly the council’s vote overwhelmingly in favor of the resolution spoke to the cooperative ethic that made the coalition successful. Yet the mayor remained reluctant to offer full public support and despite the campaign promises no black police officers were appointed. It remains unclear why the measure failed. Since the police board had final say over the standards of its members the movement to integrate the police force may have been a result of a few public officials unwillingness to allow such an incident to occur. More likely, in an era when the exclusion of African Americans from the public arena remained the norm the racial boundaries already in place proved to be to difficult to overcome.95

In response to both the successes and failures of the recent election, community politics continued to shape public debate around local concerns. Between 1874 and 1876 the rhetoric over race and class escalated; however, the substance of this debate proved once again to be politically malleable as competing corporate interests struggled for authority and autonomy in their own communities. Black neighborhood voters’ efforts to carve out political space resulted in what appeared on the surface to be the most unlikely of alliances with elite conservatives. In order to
affirm their right to independence in their own communities, former slaves were willing to compromise black political leaders’ long-time demands for civil rights. Between 1874 and 1876 neighborhood leaders aligned their political support with the “owners of the soil,” allowing the city’s economic elite to regain control of the municipal government. While this union helped legitimize elite contention that only the “best citizens” were capable of self-governance, the alliance also represented a willingness of elite Memphians to compromise their view of citizenship by recognizing African American concerns about public education. As a result, the struggle over the operation of the city’s general education system helped forge a common ground between former slaves’ desire for local control and elite efforts to regain public power.

Recently freed from slavery, the right to an education represented one of the first political demands among black migrants. The Freedmen’s Bureau, white missionary societies, and black churches responded to this demand by establishing schools throughout the city. These opportunities were widely embraced by former slaves. Brevet Brigadier General Benjamin P. Runkle, superintendent of the Freedmen’s Bureau for the Memphis district, observed that the desire of ex-slaves to acquire an education was a “matter of astonishment.” He suggested that one of the primary reasons former slaves abandoned the countryside and migrated to the city was “for the purpose of educating themselves and their children in the schools which abound and thrive under the auspices of the Bureau.” Not only children, but adults too attended school, spending countless hours in night classes learning how to read and
write. And, as early as 1865, former slaves were already expressing a desire for public education. Members of the Beale Street Baptist Church submitted a petition to federal authorities describing their interest in building more schools and securing “permanency to the system of common schools.”

In the years following emancipation, African Americans rarely separated their desire for education from community life. After the Memphis Massacre, African Americans relied primarily on neighborhood support to rebuild the schools houses burned down by the mob. Black carpenters rebuilt the freedmen school in South Memphis, while churches relied on donations from the community. The press frequently noted former slaves’ enthusiasm. By 1867, the Daily Post observed, schools were “overflowing” with almost 1,700 students enrolled in the city’s freedmen bureau, missionary, and Sabbath schools. In March of 1867, enrollment numbers revealed 2,297 African American students compared to just 1,555 white students. Established in neighborhoods throughout the city the survival of these schools were expressions of former slaves’ sense of community. An estimated crowd of 3,000 to 4,000 individuals, for example, gathered to support the city’s newly established schools in the summer of 1867 with a picnic and parade. A procession of representatives from the city’s missionary and Sabbath schools demonstrated not only former slaves’ optimism, but the public nature of the gathering suggested support for education was a cooperative endeavor. Funding depended on the collective resources of former slaves.
These views of education were often at odds with white Southerners. While a public education system existed in Memphis prior to the Civil War, it remained poorly funded. Most white southerners still considered education a private issue reserved for the wealthy. Conservatives found the idea of a publicly supported general education system for former slaves especially troublesome. “To educate the negro adults is of course impossible,” conservative editorials noted, while “to educate the small Africans who are to succeed to political power…will but to make them a little more capable of mischief.”

In response to the reluctance to provide funds for general education, African Americans in Tennessee petitioned the state legislature for the establishment of a school fund to sustain African American schools. Under Republican leadership a general school law passed in 1867, placing public education under the supervision of the Board of Education. The law also provided for the education of white and black children by levying state taxes and allowing municipalities to raise their own taxes for education. But, city leaders failed to establish a tax to fund African American education thereby necessitating the need for supplemental funds from the Freedmen’s Bureau and missionary societies into the 1870s. It took three years before Memphis established a tax for the funding of public schools. This did not substantially improve the position of public schools in Memphis, however. State funds remained limited requiring the city to rely on local taxes that often failed to meet the general education system’s financial needs.

With education still marginalized in public life, African Americans maintained a close watch over the management of city schools and organized around their desire
for local control. Given the collective importance African Americans placed upon education, it seemed warranted to many community activists that they should have a say in the decision making process. As a result, black residents attended public meetings, held neighborhood gatherings, and drafted resolutions that related their concerns. In the summer of 1873, former slaves articulated their desire to appoint only African American teachers for the city’s black schools. Evidence suggests this campaign originated among the working-class, migrant associations of south Memphis and demonstrated their dissatisfaction with the inability of the common school system to meet their needs. At a neighborhood meeting in Zion Hall on Beale Street, participants resolved the following: “that, in view of the fact that white teachers in our colored schools have failed. . . [we] respectfully ask that the services of those teachers be dispensed.” While their actions did represent a desire to link community concerns with political activism, it did not challenge proscribed racial boundaries in public life. Rather, participants avoided challenging the state’s segregation policies and expressed their desire for more autonomy over matters more directly related to their communities:

That, in view of the fact that we are proscribed by law to separate schools for our children upon the presumption of “inferiority” we respectfully ask that we may have the benefit in full, and that every teacher, from principal down, be elected from the proscribed class.102

Yet, former slaves’ demands were tempered by more established black political leaders, revealing social divisions within the community of south Memphis. One month after the neighborhood gathering in south Memphis, African Americans held a separate meeting at the Sons of Ham’s hall. It is not clear whether or not
representatives from the city’s working-class migration associations were in attendance, however, the outcome suggests long-time and more prosperous residents from the Sons of Ham directed discussions. Participants rescinded the original resolution made against white teachers and, instead, favored the selection of “competent teachers without regard to ‘race, color, or previous condition.’” These demands were much more inline with black Republicans efforts to overcome discrimination and assert civil rights. But this did not mean they were not influenced by neighborhood discussions over the operation of the city’s public schools. Evidence suggests the final resolution was a product of negotiation and collaboration designed to produce a consensus. Participants proposed that “when there is a white and a colored applicant for our colored schools that colored teachers may have the preference when his or her competency and qualification in every respect are the same.”

This resolution appealed to both former slaves’ demands for self-determination free from white influence and supervision and established community leaders contention that individuals should be recognized based on merit regardless of race. Contrary to their best efforts, however, this community initiative received little public recognition from white conservatives at the time.

This changed in the summer of 1874 when the national debate over proposed civil rights legislation elevated education to the center of political discussion. Throughout the 1870s, Charles Sumner’s Civil Rights Bill remained a subject of Congressional deliberation. The bill outlawed discrimination not only in places of public accommodation, but also in jury selection, churches, cemeteries, transportation,
and public schools. Considered too extreme by the majority of Congressional Republics, a weakened civil rights bill failed to pass the House in 1871. After the death of Sumner in the spring of 1874, supporters of Sumner reintroduced the bill in recognition of his tireless efforts for racial equality. Democrats adamantly opposed the Bill, while Congressional Republicans debated the bill’s provisions as they considered the viability of the party in the upcoming elections. For the black Congressional Republicans in session the debate highlighted their personal experiences with discrimination in the South. Witnessed by crowds of black spectators, they made statements in favor of the bill by relating incidents of racial discrimination that prevented black southerners from achieving equal opportunities. But, to white southerners and northerners alike the bills expansion of federal power and challenge to racial divisions proved to difficult to overcome especially as it related to the integration of public schools.

More importantly, this national debate accentuated local contests over the boundaries of race, class, and place in public life. Established black political leaders in the South embraced the Civil Rights Bill as an opportunity to not only protect individual rights, but as a way to help eliminate racial prejudices. Delegates at a black convention in Tennessee held that spring declared the state’s segregated general education system to be “anti-republican” and responsible for teaching whites “the spirit of caste and hate” and African Americans “inferiority.”105 By passing the bill, participants undoubtedly hoped to improve the general education system, while achieving their long-term goals for equality in public life. These sentiments were
shared by Memphis’ black political leaders as well. Edward Shaw attended the meeting and continued to support the bill throughout the months following its introduction. In addition, members of the Independent Pole-Bearers, an economically established and politically influential mutual aid society, publicly endorsed the convention held in Nashville and organized community gatherings in support of the Civil Rights Bill. As a consequence of these public declarations, the bill produced a great deal of political opposition among white southerners. Conservative editorials labeled Shaw’s participation in the Tennessee convention “a colored blunder,” claimed he was ashamed of his own race and attempting to “enter white society,” and called upon black Memphians to repudiate Shaw and the Tennessee delegation. In the months that followed, middle-class conservatives used this issue to overcome class and ethnic divisions and reframe political alliances more firmly around race by emphasizing the threat of social integration.

African American meetings received increased public scrutiny. Whereas these gatherings were once tolerated, in the new political environment neighborhood activities were considered a threat to the social order. Led by the Independent Pole-Bearers and Sons of Ham, a Memorial Day celebration at the national cemetery uncovered the extent to which pending civil rights legislation escalated racial tensions. Edward Shaw, Horatio N. Rankin, and other political leaders made public speeches and declarations in support of the bill. And while the exact order of events were disputed, reportedly members of the Independent Pole-Bearers engaged in a physical altercation with an Italian fruit stand operator who challenged neighborhood sanctions
against selling items during the ceremony. Similar to the ballot box, African Americans relied upon this type of pressure to maintain community discipline; however, these actions were interpreted by white southerners as advocating violence. In response, conservative editorials called upon black Memphians to denounce the Independent Pole-Bearers, while black politicians were forced to refute charges that this confrontation amounted to a “riot.” More than likely, conservatives exaggerated the event in order to minimize the influence of black Memphians in public life by appealing to racial fears. Indeed, in a letter to his brother John Eaton, Lucien Eaton wrote, that, “the old devilish spirit of 1866 has filled the newspaper for the past week.” The press, Eaton suggested, was trying, “to incite a riot,” and, “unite the whites violently against the blacks.”

In the political campaigns that followed conservatives rallied whites against blacks in a “white man’s movement” in order to regain public power lost in the recent municipal elections. Cognizant of the strength of the interracial alliance between African American and Irish American voters, conservatives articulated a gendered racial identity that eschewed class or ethnic distinctions. In preparation for the upcoming elections, editorials encouraged voters to “let every true man with a white skin rally to his color.” African American support of the proposed civil rights legislation helped facilitate the process by giving conservatives an issue to mobilize popular support. In response to the potential of integrated public schools, “the white voters of Shelby County,” conservatives charged, “feel that everything is at stake.” Conservative appeals for whites to “stand by their race” were, therefore, coupled with
statements in opposition to civil rights legislation. By focusing upon such a personal issue that crossed community boundaries, conservatives emphasized the dangers African Americans presented to their public and private lives. Irish voters were asked to defend their place as white men not only at the ballot box, but at home as well. “Do you desire your daughters, the progeny of a fair skinned Celtic blood, compelled by law to the social level of the African?” conservatives asked.\textsuperscript{111} Election results suggest such appeals influenced the electorate. In the 1874 county and congressional elections, conservatives won by large majorities. Democratic candidates were elected, the \textit{Appeal} reported, because white voters were “determined to do their duty as citizens.”\textsuperscript{112}

Political events, therefore, demonstrated just how tenuous African Americans’ place in the social order remained. Even though coalitions provided African Americans with an avenue to political influence, racial prejudices continued to threaten the viability of interracial alliances. The recent failure to integrate the police force and the hardening of racial lines in response to the civil rights bill among conservatives demonstrated the limits of politics to achieve equality. At the same time, despite the election of some of the “best men of property,” recent events did not ease elite anxiety about the social order either. Because they were still dependent on a class of voters they could not control, they continued to advocate for municipal reform. In the summer of 1874, the chamber of commerce issued a resolution that the people’s protective union had begun the “good and noble work of reform” by appointing “a committee of expert accountants to work in concert with a committee
from the board of Aldermen and councilmen of this city for the purpose of thoroughly investigating the condition of the city government.”\textsuperscript{113} The city’s “best citizens” stepped up their efforts to regain their position of public power by advocating the creation of a board of commissioners that removed of municipal government from the democratic excesses of popular politics. Threatened by an emerging conservative “white” middle class on the one hand and the economic elite on the other, black neighborhood voters continued to look for ways protect their interests in the post-redemption era.

Undoubtedly this political environment led some African Americans to reconsider the possibility of eroding racial prejudices through political activism. On December 9, 1874, an association of mutual aid organizations announced their intentions to align themselves with the property-holding class of white southerners. While participants represented primarily working-class, migrant institutions associated with the city’s Baptist congregations, most benevolent societies were not included. Instead, anecdotal evidence suggests members shared common bonds of fellowship in the neighborhoods of north Memphis. Composed of representatives only from the first, eighth, and ninth wards on the eastern and northern periphery of Memphis, individuals lived in close proximity to each other in areas with a higher proportion of agricultural laborers. Whether or not this amounted to an attempt to distance themselves from the politically active working-class communities of south Memphis is not clear, however, they made resolutions that demonstrated their disillusionment with local political leaders’ inability to achieve meaningful results for their communities.
“After long years of citizenship, without evil intent on our part,” members declared, “we find ourselves. . . estranged from our best interests, and in a most bitter antagonistic relation to the true people of the south – the owners of the soil – through whom alone we could only hope for prosperity in this section of the country.”114 Cast in the Washingtonian mold, alliances such as this appeared to be a complete surrender to the politics of accommodation; however, events that followed suggest neighborhood leaders’ took a pragmatic approach to politics and were frequently willing to eschew long-term political objectives in favor of immediate concerns.

Yet, most black migrants were not willing to concede authority to elite Memphians without tangible results. Controversy over the retention and appointment of black teachers in public schools demonstrated how African Americans’ struggle for autonomy in their own communities continued to influence political allegiances. Between January and July 1875 a dispute between Sarah Thompson, an African American teacher, and J. H. Barnum, a northern missionary and principle, at Clay Street School in south Memphis exposed divisions within the African American community and helped facilitate a new coalition between former slaves and elite Memphians. Known for her commitment to education and strong sense of social responsibility, Thompson advocated the hiring of more African American teachers in black public schools and often criticized the management of schools by administrators, especially Barnum. On the other hand, Barnum charged Thompson was a constant source of disruption, failed to follow proper procedures for addressing grievances, and amounted to an inadequate teacher. The matter came before the school board in
January of 1875 and the debate underscored the ways in which competing corporate interests shaped community politics.  

Thompson received community support from the working-class, migrant neighborhoods of south Memphis. A report drafted by supporters of Mrs. Thompson demonstrated how the controversy appealed to black residents desire for inclusion in the decision making process over the management of city schools. Supporters echoed Mrs. Thompson’s charges. Barnum, they argued, was guilty of “cruel and inhumane treatment to pupils; of clandestinely seeking the disparagement of our colored teachers.” By moving advancing students to Mrs. Thompson’s class without considering educational aptitude Barnum was attempting to “harass, humiliate and cripple” Mrs. Thompson in her efforts to teach and “bring her pupils up to the standard required.” More to the point, their complaints echoed longstanding demands for the appointment of black teachers to oversee the education of their children. The “friends of Thompson” included pastors, teachers, and political leaders who belonged to the Civil War era migrant population. These new arrivals, Beverly Bond argues, were more critical of northern missionaries and white supervision and control of black institutions. Even more significant the majority of supporters were community leaders with ties to the Baptist and Methodist working-class, migrant neighborhood organizations of south Memphis. Similar to the resolution drafted less than two years ago at Zion hall, supporters demonstrated a willingness to eschew demands for civil rights in favor of more autonomy within their own communities. Participants not only demanded Barnum’s removal from “any position in the colored public schools,” but
also petitioned the board of education to appoint African American teachers when a vacancy occurred.\textsuperscript{116}

On the other hand, prominent members of the antebellum free black community supported Barnum in this dispute. On January 25, 1875, a meeting of “old citizens of Memphis” revealed how place and status in the black community of south Memphis influenced this debate. They drafted a resolution purporting to express the “true sentiments of the citizens” and refuted the statement made by the “Thompson clique,” who they charged, “were so arrogant as to pronounce themselves our leaders.” Instead, they expressed a viewpoint predicated on middle-class values that through hard-work and patience they could gradually erode racial prejudices and demonstrate their worth as equal citizens. Not only were these residents more grateful to northern missionaries for their work in the community, but many also belonged to Collins Methodist Episcopal Church, which distanced itself from the religious practices of former slaves and embraced late nineteenth-century Victorian ideals of respectability and morality. As a result, these “old citizens” of Memphis rejected neighborhood efforts over the past two years “to try and take control of schools” and advocated the removal of Mrs. Thompson whose actions were disrespectful to J. H. Barnum’s longtime commitment to uplift the black community. Barnum, they noted, “has been laboring for the elevation of our children intellectually, morally, and religiously for the past eight years.” And they rejected proposals for the appointment of black teachers and favored the retention of the public schools current teachers, except Sarah Thompson. Only when it was possible to train and prepare a sufficient number of
African American teachers did they believe control should be placed more firmly under the supervision of the black community, presumably under their leadership and guidance.\textsuperscript{117}

The supporters of Thompson and the proposal to appoint more African American teachers received the most unlikely of allies from elite Memphians. In addition to a white and black lawyer, Sarah Thompson was represented by Minor Meriwether in front of the Board of Education. A former slave owner and Confederate officer, Meriwether was also a leading advocate for municipal reform and supporter of the People’s Party in recent elections. And, on January 7, 1875, a report from the People’s Protective Union gave credence to the charges made by Thompson supporters. Members criticized the tactics used by Barnum to alienate and discredit Sarah Thompson. Students from other rooms were placed in Thompson’s class “to swell the number to ninety or more, constituting five different classes or grades,” just before examinations. Elite Memphians charged the move was “unprecedented” and most likely done to “injure the teacher.”\textsuperscript{118} Composed of former slave-owners, established businessmen, wealthy investors, and well known property-holders, the support provided from these upper-class conservatives was surprising given their reluctance to recognize the right of even the best men in the African American community to participate in public life. More significantly, by entering the debate on the side of former slaves their actions extended legitimacy to the permanency of public education and neighborhood demands for local control.
But, elite Memphians’ public statements on the Thompson-Barnum dispute and additional declarations they made in the month of January 1875 actually served to affirm their criticism of the post-Civil War social order. The People’s Protective Union included their declaration of support for Sarah Thompson as part of a much larger report on the mismanagement of city schools. As a result, by calling for the removal of Barnum, they expressed their disdain for northern outsiders, the ineffectual governance of city affairs, and the escalated tax burden placed upon property-owners as a result of laws and legislation implemented during Reconstruction. Members complained that the city school board was governed by rules created in 1866 and operated independently allowing it to levy taxes and spend with “reckless extravagance.” They confirmed these charges by noting examples of overspending. As a result of these accusations, members recommended the repeal of the city school charter and the placement of public schools under the governance of the general school law of the state. These efforts were clearly designed to limit democratic influences by removing the schools board from popular control in the hopes of lessening the tax burden placed upon elite property-holders. Members revealed their political intentions in a report one week later. The People’s Protective Union recommended the levying of a poll tax to pay for a workhouse to hold vagrants in the area and a small portion to be added to the common school fund. This act, while seemingly generous to education, would exclude the majority of poor, property-less classes from voting and, in the long-run, potentially limit the funds available for public education.
More importantly, elite Memphians efforts to reform the city’s public education were part of their long-term initiatives to reclaim public authority from the inchoate middle-class, black political leaders and activists, and the working-class electorate. At the same time upper-class Memphians entered the debate over the appointment and retention of black teachers, they also proposed substantial reforms to the city’s charter designed to limit democracy. On January 12, 1875, a report by the People’s Protective Union recommended the creation of a board of three commissioners nominated by the governor of the state with the “advise and consent of the Senate” to manage local affairs. A precursor to the city-management movement of the progressive era, these property-holders undoubtedly hoped placing municipal affairs under the control of the conservatively controlled state government would result in the appointment of individuals more willing to limit public expenses and reduce taxes. They also made explicit statements affirming their belief that only the “best citizens” were capable of exercising political authority.

We have in our midst a large and controlling voting element, which has but little at stake in the welfare of our city. This element combined as it generally is, with some other element more ambitious of office. Because these individuals paid “little or no taxes,” elite Memphians argued, they supported the increased financial burden disproportionately placed upon property-holders. But, even more damaging to elite Memphians, the escalating indebtedness of the city treasury legitimized their view that the property-less classes were incapable of self-government. As a consequence, they favored municipal reform “to remove our city government, and the business interest of the city, away from the popular elections
of the times.” By doing so, reformers hoped to eliminate the unpredictable influences of neighborhood politics and the election of “incompetent office seekers and idles.”

Elite Memphians continued to support Sarah Thompson and the migrant communities throughout the public controversy. Writing in March later that year, Elizabeth Meriwether, the wife of Minor Meriwether and a leading advocate for female teachers, observed that “many of the oldest and best citizens of Memphis were deeply interested in the issue of the case, believing Mrs. Thompson was the victim of a vile conspiracy.”

Considered in light of the political climate, elite involvement in this debate is indicative of the compromises southern conservatives were willing to make with former slaves, so long as it did not substantially challenge race or class boundaries. By affirming the legitimacy of former slaves’ grievances, the event demonstrated the extent to which southern conservatives were forced to recognize African Americans political power. While the school board initially affirmed the charges made against Mrs. Thompson and removed her from her teaching position at the Clay Street School, in July of 1875 a black principle was appointed along with African American teachers appealing to neighborhood leaders’ longstanding demands for local control. The outcome supports Howard Rabinowitz’s assertion that in the post-Civil War environment African Americans often preferred segregation to the only viable alternative – exclusion from the public sphere all together. Despite considerable efforts by some of the most established and prosperous black leaders to assert civil rights and achieve equality, recent elections suggested the limits of politics to erode racial prejudices, and more importantly to the black migrant population,
protect the integrity of their communities. As a result neighborhood leaders were willing to forge an alliance with the “former owners of the soil” because it represented one of the few remaining avenues open to political influence; however, in the process this union extended legitimacy to the elite assertions that only the “best citizens” should have authority to govern local affairs.

An African American Fourth of July celebration held later that year demonstrated the willingness of former slaves to embrace this union as a way to maintain a political presence in the post-redemption era. Similar to most post-emancipation freedom commemorations, former slaves expressed their sense of place in the new social order through bonds of fellowship and camaraderie in the parade and neighborhood celebrations that took place. Early in the morning, after the sound of fife and drum music, various mutual aid organizations assembled together for a procession through the city’s streets. “In and around court square,” the Daily Appeal noted, members of African Americans benevolent societies “congregated in great numbers” waiting for the parade to begin. And “men, women, and children were flecking about the street in anticipation of the procession of the organizations.” By mid-morning the different societies headed by music bands paraded through downtown Memphis on route to their respective neighborhood picnics and gatherings. The most anticipated event was a “peace gathering” of former slaves and upper-class Memphians at the Fair Grounds just outside the city limits. The Independent Pole-Bearers invited a number of “prominent southern gentlemen” to attend the celebration. Despite the cessation of racial violence in recent years, the “white man’s movement”
heightened racial tensions and, the Daily Appeal noted, a considerable amount of “anxiety” surrounded the outcome of this gathering. The paper estimated that “at least five thousand” people attended the festivities. Like other freedom commemorations, music, dance, food, and drink shared among friends and neighbors accompanied this ceremony. But unlike previous celebrations prominent black leaders made speeches along side southern conservatives.\textsuperscript{124}

The participation of Nathan Bedford Forrest represented the most visible example of upper-class Memphians efforts to reshape the political terrain in their favor. Forrest and several ex-Confederates accepted the Independent Pole-Bearers invitation to attend the Fourth of July celebration. Reportedly during the ceremony after the daughter of an officer in the Pole-Bearers presented Forrest with a bouquet of flowers as a “token of reconciliation and an offering of peace and good-will” he made a conciliatory speech directed at the crowd of black southerners in attendance. Considered by some scholars as evidence of Forrest’s racial moderation towards former slaves, an examination of his speech actually demonstrated how southern paternalism influenced elite assertions that only the “best men” should lead.\textsuperscript{125} Forrest accepted the flowers as a “memento of reconciliation between the white and colored races of the southern states” and espoused a willingness to help elevate former slaves “to take positions in law offices, in stores, on farms, and wherever you are capable of going.” And while he did not “propose to say anything about politics” it is clear recent political events were on his mind as he made allowances for black southerners place in the public sphere. He espoused the ideology of the “best men” which allowed
some African Americans positions of political influence, so longs as they lived up to white middle-class definitions of respectability. “You have the right to elect whom you please,” Forrest continued, conditional on voting “for the man you think best.”

Conciliatory in tone, Forrest expressed a veiled criticism of the post-Civil War social order and the elected officials who governed local affairs. Black southerners were encouraged to “do as you consider right and honest in electing men for office.” Forrest and others arrived at these conclusions only after of years of struggling to regain political power. In the current political environment they were forced to make concessions in recognition of the political power and competing corporate interests of black communities. With laws and the threat of federal intervention still in place to protect black southerners voting rights, some public recognition of neighborhood interests appeared preferable to the potentially real alternative – the continued marginalization of upper-class Memphians from local self-governance. Though, their paternalistic notions of southern race relations tempered their intentions. Similar to many former slave-owners, elite Memphians had long claimed to be the “best friends” of black southerners. Forrest noted that often he had been in battle “when colored men asked me to protect them.” And in response Forrest stated, “I have placed myself between them and the bullets of my men, and told them they should be kept unharmed.” Undoubtedly Forrest and others believed former slaves would look to the city’s “best citizens” for guidance in public matters. “Go to work, be industrious, live honestly and act truly,” Forrest concluded, “and when you are oppressed I’ll come to your relief.”

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African Americans demonstrated their support of this coalition in the upcoming municipal election. On November 21, 1875, upper-class Memphians issued a call for a mass meeting to nominate a mayor that ensured the Democratic Party assumed “full responsibility for the management and control of the affairs of the city.” Throughout the nomination process elite Memphians expressed their concern over the city’s escalating debt, created, Minor Meriwether charged, “under the rule of the bayonet.” Members of the Democratic Party with elite support nominated John Flippin over John Johnson, a former mayor and favored political candidate among Irish Democrats and middle-class conservatives. Unlike previous elections, however, evidence suggests elite conservatives received community support from the black neighborhoods of Memphis. Undoubtedly in reference to the “white man’s movement” and the escalation of racial tensions in the previous elections, officers from the Pole-Bearers claimed “the whites in the election for mayor have not drawn the color line.” And they welcomed white southerners’ rhetorical appeals to eschew “class or race distinctions in elections as there are none.”

Although African Americans offered community support in response to the failure of black and white Republicans leaders to achieve their demands for civil rights just as much as in their belief in the benevolent intentions of elite Memphians. Republican leaders visited neighborhood meetings in south Memphis to garner political support for Mayor Loague’s reelection. Yet, opposition to Loague had clearly been mounting. In the previous municipal election African Americans helped
elect “anti-Loague” candidates to city council. And, days before the mayoral election, an editorial by an anonymous African American expressed former slaves’ disillusionment with the failures of political leaders to achieve meaningful results for their communities. While many African Americans voted for Loague in the previous election “in good faith,” they were disappointed by his failures to live up to his promises to integrate the police force. As a result of these competing corporate interests, African Americans played a crucial role in legitimizing the “best citizens” exclusive claim to governing local matters. Loague’s defeat, the Daily Appeal reported, resulted from the 1,500 black votes “being cast for Flippin.” At the same time, neighborhood voters demonstrated their political power. In the years that followed, this middle ground remained contested and subject to reconsideration, as black voters continued to respond to issues and look for ways to protect community interests and solidify their place in the social order.

1 Memphis Daily Appeal, March 28, 1874, 4.
3 Ibid., 14-23.
5 In 1870, only 123 black men and women owned any real estate, while just thirty-one identified themselves in possession of any personal property of significant value. Most of the city’s capital remained in the hands of elite white Memphians. One historian’s examination of real estate assessments reveals that just 5% of the city’s population owned taxable real property. The preponderance of unskilled manual laborers prevented most black Memphians from becoming part of the property-owner class. And the majority of those who did own property were of modest means. The average value of real and personal property among the black population ranged between $150 and $600. See, Davis, “Against the Odds,” 53-55 and Wrenn, Crisis and Commission Government in Memphis, 7.
7 Davis, “Against the Odds,” 61.
8 Osthaus, Freedmen, Philanthropy, and Fraud, 92-96, 215. Observers noted deposits in the Memphis branch were proportionately lower than other cities soon after its establishments. See Memphis Daily Appeal, June 26, 1867, 8.
While marginalized in local politics, an examination of the city’s economic developments demonstrates that members of the antebellum property-holding class still maintained a good deal of social and economic influence and were willing to promote industrial developments as long as it suited their interest. Their role in shaping economic policies was similar to the economic influence members of the planter elite maintain in other regions of the South. See, for example, Jonathan Wiener, *Social Origins of the New South: Alabama, 1860-1885* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1978). In Memphis, the antebellum elite did not oppose industrial development; so long as it did not fundamentally alter the plantation economy. Like other southern areas railroad subsidies received public support from white Republicans and Democrats. See Michael Perman, *The Road to Redemption: Southern Politics, 1869-1879* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1984) and Mark W. Summers, *Railroads, Reconstruction, and the Gospel of Prosperity: Aid under the Radical Republicans, 1865-1877* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1984).

A number of historians have observed increased factionalism over political appointments often resulted in African American economic and political concerns being ignored. For a good discussion of the political consequences of the marginalization of African Americans within the Republican Party see Laura F. Edwards, *Gendered Strife and Confusion: The Political Culture of Reconstruction* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1997), 219-229.

A small contingent of white Republicans under the leadership of S. B. Beaumont, the Metropolitan Police Chief, David Nunn, and A. T. Shaw frequently competed for elected offices and patronage and threatened to weaken the Republican Party’s influence in Memphis politics. See Barbour Lewis to John Eaton, April 17, 1868, May 6, 1868, July 15, 1868, December 8, 1868, John Eaton Papers, Tennessee State Library and Archives; Walter J. Fraser, Jr., “Black Reconstructionists in Tennessee,” *Tennessee Historical Quarterly* 34 (Winter 1975): 362-382. Despite these fears, independent Republicans had a minimal impact on electoral outcome. Republicans elected candidates to office, although they never monopolized the political arena during Reconstruction.


Barbour Lewis to John Eaton, February 5, 1868, John Eaton Collection. In response to black political demands, two African Americans for magistrate and two for constable in the Shelby County elections held in the spring of 1868 were included on the Republican ticket. See Fraser, “Black Reconstructionists in Tennessee."


Supported primarily by a black electorate, Shaw became the first African American in West Tennessee and third in the state to be voted to elected office.

*Daily Appeal*, July 12, 1872.


Ibid., October 4, 1870, 4.

Ibid., October 6, 1870, 4.


Kathleen Berkeley writes, “the ethnic factor continued to influence every facet of urban life in postbellum Memphis from the urban economy to education, but it manifested itself first and foremost in the political arena. Berkeley, “Ethnicity and Its Implications for Southern Urban History,” 199.

The Republican Party often looked to take advantage of these political divisions. In the 1868 congressional election, black Republicans held political rallies appealing to disaffected Irish Democrats who felt alienated from native-born conservatives. See *Daily Post*, October 6, 1868; November 2, 1868; Berkeley, “Ethnicity and Its Implications for Southern Urban History,” 195. But, despite the Republican Party’s political appeals to Irish conservatives, the Democratic vote actually increased by 110 votes in comparison to the previous municipal election. See *Memphis Daily Post*, January 2, 1868, 8; November 4, 1868, 1, 4. While Kathleen Berkeley agrees that the Democratic Party remained consistent she argues that the African American vote “materialized” for the Congressional election. Berkeley, “Ethnicity and Its Implications for Southern Urban History,” 195. However, Republican totals remained consistent with the previous election that spring. See *Memphis Daily Post*, March 9, 1868, 1.

*Daily Appeal*, February 8, 1870, 4; February 10, 1870, 4.

Berkeley, “Ethnicity and Its Implications for Southern Urban History,” 197, 198.

Lucien Eaton to John Eaton, March 21, 1870, John Eaton Papers, Special Collections, the University of Tennessee Library, Knoxville.

*Memphis Daily Avalanche*, March 27, 1870, 3.


Barbour Lewis to John Eaton, March 29, 1870, in the John Eaton Papers.

Berkeley, “Ethnicity and Its Implications for Southern Urban History,” 197, 198.


Foner, *Reconstruction*.

Glenda Gilmore explains this language of the “best man” was deployed by elite Southerners to establish their political and economic dominance. See Glenda Elizabeth Gilmore, *Gender and Jim Crow: Women and the Politics of White Supremacy in North Carolina, 1896-1920* (Chapel Hill:
University of North Carolina Press, 1996). While prosperous and established African Americans often embraced this concept, this political language had limited appeal to the formerly enslaved black migrant communities in Memphis.

55 *Daily Post*, December 24, 1867, 8.

56 Members of the tax-payers association were compiled from organizational meeting lists provided in the local papers. These names were cross-referenced with the ninth federal census and local city directories. At first glance, these organizational meetings appear to confirm the historical narrative that taxes and the Republican mismanagement of financial affairs facilitated redemption in the American South. See, for example, J. Mills Thornton, “Fiscal Policy and the Failure of Radical Reconstruction in the Lower South,” in *Region, Race, and Reconstruction: Essays in Honor of C. Vann Woodward*, ed. by J. Morgan Kousser and James M. McPherson (New York: Oxford University Press, 1982), 349-394. However, in Memphis, this movement began immediately after the Civil War before the city’s debt began to escalate.

57 *Daily Appeal*, April 5, 1871, 4.

58 *Daily Appeal*, April 15, 1871, 4.


60 *Memphis Daily Appeal*, May 19, 1872, 2.


62 O. F. Vedder, *History of the City of Memphis and Shelby County, Tennessee* (Syracuse, 1888), 153-54.

63 *Memphis Daily Appeal*, June 27, 1872, 4.

64 *Memphis Daily Appeal*, November 30, 1873, 2.


67 *Daily Appeal*, December 16, 1871, 4; December 17, 1871, 4; December 22, 1871, 4; December 31, 1871, 2, 3; January 1, 1872, 2; January 3, 1872; January 4, 1872, 2.

68 *Memphis Daily Appeal*, December 6, 1870, 4; December 10, 1873, 2.

69 While ward boundaries do not fully encapsulate the sum of black or white community life, they do provide a more nuanced way to explore how individuals attempted to enforce and challenge the racial and class boundaries of daily life through politics.

70 *Daily Appeal*, January 6, 1872, 4; January 3, 1873, 4; January 2, 1874, 4;


72 *Daily Appeal*, January 7, 1871, 4; January 8, 1871, 4; December 16, 1871, 4.

73 In the fourth ward, for example, some of the city’s leading merchants and property-owners were undoubtedly relieved to see the election of candidates they supported for local office. *Daily Appeal*, December 14, 1871, 4; January 9, 1872.

74 *Daily Appeal*, December 21, 1871, 4; January 3, 1872, 4.

75 *Daily Appeal*, January 6, 1872, 4; January 7, 1872, 4; January 8, 1872, 4; January 9, 1872, 4;

76 *Daily Appeal*, January 9, 1872, 4.

77 *Daily Appeal*, November 12, 1871, 1.

78 *Daily Appeal*, December 25, 1872, 4; January 3, 1873, 4.


80 *Daily Appeal*, December 19, 1872, 2; December 25, 1872, 4; November 24, 1873, 1; November 25, 1873, 4; November 27, 1873, 4.

81 *Daily Avalanche*, November 27, 1873.

82 *Daily Appeal*, November 30, 1873, 2.

83 *Daily Appeal*, December 5, 1873, 2.


85 *Daily Appeal*, December 7, 1873, 1; December 23, 1873, 2.

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*Daily Appeal*, December 9, 1873; *Daily Avalanche*, December 9, 1873.


*Memphis Daily Appeal*, December 17, 1873, 4.

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*Memphis Daily Appeal*, January 15, 1874, 4; January 20, 1874, 4; April 4, 1874, 4; April 15, 1874, 1.


*Daily Post*, February 8, 1867; March 4, 1867.

*Daily Post*, June 1, 1867, 8; June 4, 1867, 4.

*Daily Appeal*, March 21, 1867, 3.

Davis, “Against the Odds.”

Ibid., 38-41.

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*Daily Appeal*, January 9, 1876, 2; January 11, 1876, 2.

*Daily Appeal*, January 9, 1876, 2; January 11, 1876, 4.
131 Daily Appeal, January 14, 1876, 4.
Epilogue

The freeing of the nation’s four million slaves was the “most dramatic” moment in American history and with it came the possibility of a “real and new democracy,” W. E. B. Du Bois wrote in his classic study Black Reconstruction in America. Writing from a historical materialist perspective, for Du Bois the promise of Reconstruction emerged from the success of biracial social movements in communities across the South. But, Du Bois also spoke to the patterns of change and continuity that accompanied this era.

A great song arose, the loveliest thing born this side the seas. It was a new song. It did not come from Africa, though the dark throb and beat of that Ancient of Days was in it and through it. It did not come from white America—never from so pale and hard and thin a thing, however deep these vulgar and surrounding tones had driven. Not the Indies nor the hot South, the cold East or heavy West made that music. It was a new song and its deep plaintive beauty, its great cadences and wild appeal wailed, throbbed and thundered on the world’s ears with a message seldom voiced by man. It swelled and blossomed like incense, improvised and born anew out of an age long past, and weaving into its texture that old and new melodies in word and in thought.¹

The circumstances and events that made up that “new song” remains a vital topic for exploring not only the failures and successes of Reconstruction, but also the meaning and promise of American democracy.

Memphis’ central location in the Mid-South makes it an ideal area to examine the role former slaves’ played in composing the notes that made up that “new song.”
While members of the antebellum free black population took an early organizational role in laying down the social and political foundations for the post-slavery black community, they represented a very small portion of the overall African American population. Instead, most the work of freedom lay with former slaves, the majority of them migrants from the surrounding cotton plantations of the Mississippi River Valley. They made up the schools, churches, and neighborhood organizations that transformed the character of civic life in Memphis. While they embraced their lives as free people, they also drew upon the social and cultural traditions that were familiar as they looked to begin their lives anew. And, because the black population was always churning, with migrants moving in and out of the city daily, newcomers remained connected to their history. The personal relationships and neighborhood associations former slaves’ formed remained a crucial bridge to incorporating migrants into their new communities without completely shedding the social and cultural heritage of their past.

The process of laying down social and cultural roots in a new environment made an indelible imprint on politics. Much of former slaves’ concerns remained local connected to their daily lives as migrants, neighbors, parents, and friends and family. Therefore, while national debates represented social change on a grand scale, they were often recast to reflect local concerns. Former slaves, for example, identified politics as part of the process of declaring independence from white Southerners. To be sure the rhetoric of civil rights, equality, and democracy appealed to their search for justice and the right to live their lives with dignity and self-respect, however, as other
scholars have shown political participation remained inseparable from their desire for self-determination. In Memphis, this manifested itself in former slaves’ desire to promote and protect the welfare of their friends and families. And, as migrant communities matured, former slaves’ aligned themselves with neighbors regardless of race, class, or political affiliation, so long as neighborhood interests were advanced.

Throughout the Civil War and Reconstruction Era, politics remained a contested terrain. To elite white Memphians the elusive and short-term nature of neighborhood coalitions demonstrated that excesses of popular democracy. Lacking popular affirmation, members of the elite advocated municipal reform and racial moderation to build majority support. They were willing to making alliances with former slaves so long as these coalitions did not substantially challenge race or class hierarchies. These coalitions remained short-lived and subject to the dictates of competing corporate interests. Ultimately, a devastating Yellow Fever Epidemic in the summer of 1878 turned popular support in elite favor. In 1879, the state revoked the city’s charter, replacing ward politics with a Board of Commissioners consisting of state appointed and citywide elected officials. As a result, the Bluff City ceased to exist as Memphis and entered a thirteen-year period of elite rule, eliminating some of the unpredictable democratic excesses of post-Civil War politics.

Yet, in the late nineteenth century, African Americans maintained a presence in the public sphere. Contrary to historical assumptions, politics never represented a real viable avenue for lasting interracial cooperation. Throughout the post-Civil War era, African Americans fought working and middle-class Democrats, white
Republicans, and elite southerners against their exclusion altogether. Neighborhood coalitions, therefore, represented one way to promote their interests and maintain some political influence. Unlike other southern communities, however, African Americans were not completely excluded from the political arena during the era of Jim Crow. They continued to vote and influence the outcome of local elections, so long as they did not substantially challenge the dictates of white supremacy. In the nineteenth century this represented a victory of sorts as African Americans searched to build their communities and claim their independence. But, in the twentieth century, the parameters of this contest changed and, once again, members of the African American communities in Memphis strived to compose new melodies that made up a completely “new song.”

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